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SEPTEMBER 328

# MIKE SHAYNE

## MYSTERY MAGAZINE



SEPT, 1977  
VOL. 41, NO. 3

TWO COMPLETE SHORT NOVELS

### THE NEW MIKE SHAYNE THRILLER A LADY FOR KILLING by BRETT HALLIDAY

*A missing girl, a loot-laden attaché case and the czarina of an international cosmetics empire plunge the redhead into one of his most baffling and dangerous cases, making him walk a turbulent tightrope between an angry police force and an enraged underworld* ..... 2 to 45

### A CHAIN OF STRANGE DEATHS THE APOSTLE MURDERS by CAROLE OTTIFY GRILLION

*Neither James Davenport nor the gang he ran with was the lovable type. Hateful, loathsome, never lovable. Still, when James' headless body was found, the sheriff of Eminence, Missouri, had to make a show of seeking the killer. But then, Jim's pals began to die strange deaths* ..... 58 to 93

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# A LADY FOR KILLING

At the outset, two problems faced the Miami redhead and his client—where had Michelle Lamont vanished to, and where had the black attaché case containing \$400,00 appeared from?

by **BRETT HALLIDAY**

WHAT IMPRESSED Shayne most was the silence. From the moment the statuesque all-in-black blonde answered his touch on the door-bell of Orla Rubens' vast Miami Beach apartment until he was ushered into the presence of the cosmetics czarina, the red-headed detective felt as if he were part of a movie with the sound track turned off.

Footfalls were lost in the velvet-like carpeting that covered the floors of rooms and corridors alike. No windows admitted the night noises of the

city surrounding them. The air conditioning that kept the temperature at an even 80 degrees Fahrenheit (or so Shayne judged it) operated without sound.

No voices broke the stillness until his prospective employer, after a quick, gimlet-eyed study, spoke.

After setting up the appointment earlier that evening via a table telephone in the Flamingo Club, Hannes Logan, who handled Orla Rubens' legal affairs in Miami, had warned him that a meeting with the cosmetics

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czarina would be a happening.

"You probably won't believe it, Shayne," Logan had told him. "But don't let the trap-pings deceive you. Orla, is very much for real."

Viewing her for the first time in the flesh, the redhead could not help but wonder whether Logan had been putting him on. Wearing an imperial purple robe embroidered with golden bees, Orla Rubens sat upon a striped Empire sofa set against a dark golden wall adorned with what looked like original Greuze portraits of the Empres-ses Josephine and Marie Louise.

Orla herself looked like a reincarnation of Napoleon—not the lean hot-eyed youthful victor of Arcola and Marengo but the plumper, more mature conqueror of Jena and Austerlitz.

"Thank you for coming, Mr. Shayne."

The words were not remarkable, but the voice that uttered them was unforgettable—deep, mellow-rich, roughly timbred, endowed with an unplaceable alien accent.

The speaker flicked a heavily ringed forefinger and the tall silent blonde who had ushered him in glided swiftly from the presence with the grace of a lady gymnast. Another flick of the hand directed the detective to a cane-backed chair many

times more comfortable than it looked.

The she-Napoleon leaned forward, said, "Mr. Shayne, I want you to find Michelle Lamont, my confidential secretary. She has disappeared."

"How long has she been missing?" Although he stood well over six feet and the woman opposite barely topped five, Shayne felt as if their sizes had been unaccountably reversed. TV's Columbo minus only the rumpled trench coat and the bumbling.

Orla Rubens was a presence who transcended mere physical dimensions.

"Since yesterday afternoon," she told him.

"Surely," the redhead replied, "that is not very long. Have you any reason to suspect..."

She pounced on his hesitation like a cat. "...foul play?" The golden bees rustled faintly as she leaned forward again. "Mr. Shayne, you do not understand. I conduct a big business in many cities on five continents with a very small staff. To do this efficiently, I must have very good people and pay them extremely well. In return, I must know exactly where they are at all times—at *all* times, do you understand, Mr. Shayne?"

He nodded, was about to suggest that the police could

handle the job far more swiftly and efficiently than he could—then discarded this idea, deciding that Orla Rubens would have gone to them unless she had good reason not to, a probability that intrigued him.

Instead, he said, "Then this is not the first time your secretary has disappeared?"

The dark brown eyes flashed briefly and he sensed she had read his thoughts. She said, "Quite right, Mr. Shayne. In the past eleven months, it has happened five—no, six—times. Once in Brussels, once in Vienna, once in Rio, twice in Paris, once in New York. The absences were brief—a matter of a few hours each—and Michelle was always able to account for them."

A pause, then, "Not lamely, mind you, Mr. Shayne—if anything, she was too glib. I thought, perhaps a lover." The eyes flashed again, a small smile turned the Napoleon mouth upward. Then, with a headshake, "But in so many places over a course of months?"

The detective nodded, said, "Then you suspect. . ."

"Find Michelle, Mr. Shayne. Then I shan't have to suspect. Will you do it?"

"I'll try," he promised. "But I'll need more information—photos, something more about

her that might suggest where she is apt to go."

She nodded slowly, said, "Mr. Shayne, you are still not satisfied—am I right?"

The redhead rose, looked down at her but retained the sensation that his plump little woman was towering over him. He said, "You're damned right I'm not satisfied, Ms. Rubens. You know what I'm going to have to do is call the hospitals, the police, the morgue—all things you are quite capable of doing yourself if you have not already done so. And, as our mutual friend Hannes Logan must have informed you, I do not come cheap."

She nodded. Apparently the sofa on which she sat was equipped with some sort of communications system, for the tall blonde in black reappeared bearing a manila folder and a black alligator-skin attaché case, which she laid on the sofa alongside her employer, then disappeared.

When she had gone, Orla Rubens said, "Very good, Mr. Shayne. No, I have not gone to the police and you wish to know why. Here, I show you."

She unlocked the gold hasps of the attaché case, opened it, lifting the top so that the redhead could view its contents.

It was packed to the brim with neat stacks of bank notes



wrapped in unmarked paper bindings. Lifting one of them, she riffled it like a deck of cards said, "There are fifty one-hundred dollar bills in each of these. The case contains eighty of them. Four hundred thousand dollars. I found it in the closet of Michelle's room when I looked through her things this afternoon."

Shayne felt his eyebrows lift. He said, "Yours, Ms. Rubens?"

The lady Napoleon shook her dark casqued head emphatically. Please don't call me that hideous *Ms.*" She hissed the *s* like an irritated cobra. "Madame, if you wish—or Orla. I prefer Orla. It is thus that I am known to my friends. No, this is not my money."

"All right, Orla." The detective sat down. "What's your guess?"

She golden bees danced as the cosmetics czarina shrugged. She said, "Our mutual friend has informed me that you prefer Martell."

Evidently, another button had been pressed, for the silent blonde reappeared, this time bearing a folding table-tray of ebony mounted in silver which she placed between Shayne and her employer. Atop the tray were a bottle of his preferred cognac, one of cointreau, a silver ice bowl and two glasses of gleaming crystal, one a

liqueur tumbler, the other a stemless inhaler.

After pouring the drinks as deftly as any barmaid, Orla Rubens said, lifting the whaler, "To a successful search, Mr. Shayne."

He said amen to that, sipped his drink. She did likewise, put her tiny glass down, wrinkled her nose, said, "I have an incurable sweet tooth—even in drinks." Then, dismissing the subject, "My business is my life. I know to the penny what every one of my products has earned or lost for every fiscal period. I do not need either computers or an abacus. It is all in here."

She tapped her forehead with a rose-tipped forefinger, added, "I leave the long tables with their bottom lines to my accountants and the tax people. They need them, I do not. If I were being ripped off by a single penny, I would know this before they did."

"And if some pilferage exists—which, of course, it does—I could truthfully tell you exactly how much has been stolen. I can quite as truthfully tell you that no amount approaching four hundred thousand dollars is missing or ever has been. Now do you begin to understand why I am turning to you?"

Mike Shayne nodded as he put down his empty glass on



the tray table. He said, "I'm getting the idea, Orla. Now, let's see the flap on the missing mademoiselle."

## II

WHEN MIKE SHAYNE LEFT Orla Rubens' lavish apartment atop the ultra-modern, windowless, blocklike building devoted to the cosmetics czarina's flourishing Miami Beach enterprises, his wristwatch read 10:17 p.m. The folder Orla had given him contained considerable material to digest and the detective did not feel like going home this early. Instead, he took the causeway to his office on Flagler, let himself into his second-floor two-room suite and settled down to study it.

The photographs of Michelle Lamont revealed a slim young brunette with well cut features, a flashing smile and large brown eyes deep set beneath a broad, low intelligent forehead. Her figure, displayed in a strip of poolside bikini shots, was long and lean of torso and limbs, pleasantly full and firm of bosom.

Michelle's picture-aura radiated intelligence plus a suggestion of humor. Her age, as revealed by the documents also enclosed, was given as 28; her birthplace Paris.

She had joined the Orla Rubens organization immediately



upon graduation from the Sorbonne at the early age of 19. Her progress had been rapid. She had served the czarina as confidential secretary for the past four years. Her salary was not given but Shayne judged it to be substantial, if only to prevent such a jewel from being hijacked by one of the rival cosmetics concerns in that highly competitive field.

This was also suggested by her employer's wry remark to the redhead that, "Michelle's one flaw—if it is indeed a flaw—lies in her very typical Frenchwoman's love of money."

From the otherwise dry dossier, Shayne gleaned that the missing girl was careful about her food and drink, loved American popular and rock music and was fond of dancing. There was no hint as to friends or acquaintances in Miami outside of those in the Rubens organization—no hint of where she might have gone, or why, or how she might come into possession of the \$400,000 in cash or have left it behind her.

Nor had Orla Rubens supplied any clues apart from the fact that Michelle was a heavy cigaret smoker and spoke effortless English with only a faint trace of accent.

Shayne selected two snapshots of the girl, one full face and one in profile, stashed them in a breast pocket. He clipped the remaining photos to the folder and affixed the retainer check for \$1,000 Orla had handed him atop the package with a memo to Lucy Hamilton to enter the case on the books when she came in to work in the morning.

Then, pouring himself a half tumbler of Martell from the half-empty fifth kept in a file drawer, he sat back to consider the problem of running Michelle Lamont to earth.

There were, of course, four possibilities. The first was that the girl was dead. The others,

in no special order, were that she might be in hiding somewhere in the Miami area, that she might have fled the area entirely, that she might have decamped of her own free will for personal problems.

Shayne discounted the last on the grounds that she would hardly have left the money-filled attaché case so carelessly behind her if she were pursuing a love affair or some other form of personal pleasure. Not if she was as fond of money as her employer had suggested.

If Michelle had left the Miami area, there was little the detective could do to find her that official agencies could not do far more efficiently. He ruled it out for the present. Likewise, the possibility of her being dead.

This left the possibility that she was under cover, voluntarily or otherwise, somewhere in a sprawling city and suburban area comprising an approximate 2,000,000 souls.

So where the hell should he start looking?

Good question with no immediate answers.

The redhead decided to concentrate on the \$400,000 she had left behind her. Even in an era of inflation, it was a lot of cash. The even-ness of the sum suggested some sort of payoff. He wondered if her previous,

briefier disappearances had involved any such large round sums.

Brussels, Vienna, Rio, Paris twice and New York... and now Miami.

The money had to come from somewhere—but what, Shayne wondered, could even a young woman as obviously efficient as Micelle have for sale worth \$400,000 to anyone? Another good question. The only answer he could come up with was that the money had not been paid to Michelle but entrusted to her for delivery elsewhere.

And that opened up a whole other can of questions, questions for whose answers he had no idea where to look.

Shayne decided to call it a night and go home...

As he toiled his Buick out of the office parking lot, the detective noted idly a pale Mustang sedan parked across the street. He would not have given it a second thought had he not, in taking a right corner at the end of the block, caught a rear-view mirror glimpse of the Mustang pulling away from the curb in what looked like the beginning of a U-turn.

A half-smile lighted his face as he thought, *Somebody else cares...*

Usually, when the detective found himself being tailed, he wanted only to get rid of the

follower. This time he welcomed pursuit as a possible opening in what looked thus far like a blank wall. He made no attempt to shake this shadow, drove directly to his Second Avenue apartment hotel.

However, instead of driving down the ramp to the basement parking garage beneath his home, Shayne pulled into the curb and stopped in front of the aging residential building, checked the Colt .45 in its shoulder harness and lit a cigaret. He did not have long to wait.

The pale Mustang came around the corner behind him and braked to a sudden halt as its driver saw the redhead's Buick parked at the curb halfway down the block. As nearly as Shayne could tell by the mirror, the driver was male and alone.

The detective decided to wait him out. For long, slow-ticking minutes, the stalemate continued. Neither car nor driver moved.

Finally, Shayne decided he had had enough. He put the Buick from *park* to *reverse*, preparing to back toward an open encounter with his pursuer. *Might as well have it out and over with*, he thought as he lifted his foot from the brake pedal.

He braked again quickly as

the sudden bright beam of a car searchlight pinned the Mustang in its glare. It came from a black-and-white sedan that had evidently been idling a block further behind the two cars. Even as Shayne halted his backward progress, the black-and-white picked up speed, holding the lighter car in its spotlight beam.

Putting the Buick in neutral, the redhead twisted to get a more direct view of what was happening. He saw the driver of the Mustang make a desperate effort to scramble clear of the front seat as the black-and-white pulled up alongside.

There was a single, shattering blast of machine-gun fire that caught Shayne's unhappy pursuer halfway out the car door and seemed to fling him through it to fall forward on the sidewalk, a human scarecrow that flopped grotesquely as it dropped.

The searchlight snapped off and the black-and-white sedan picked up speed, burning rubber as it passed the redhead. Mike Shayne noted the Miami Police Department crest on its near door as it sped by him. He ducked when it came abreast and then rolled on, then yanked the Colt free and snubbed off the safety.

There was no second burst of automative fire. . . .

Mike Shayne drew his .45 and took aim at a rear tire—but idid not pull the trigger. He could not fire at a police vehicle. Rubber burned as he got the Buick launched in pursuit. He had a brief but definite impression that the two men on the seat of the black-and-white were not wearing police uniforms.

Since the quiet streets in the redhead's home area were almost free of traffic, it developed into a headlong chase.

Whoever was piloting the black-and-white knew how to handle a wheel and, at first, the car of the killers increased the distance between the vehicles. The detective was forced to employ all of his skill and experience to hold his fleeing quarry in sight and began to fear he would not get a chance to shoot.

An element of luck broke in Shayne's favor as the black-and-white, after turning toward the riverbank road, struck a street-repair sawhorse, veered and all but crashed into a lamppost, costing it considerable speed and distance. The redhead's Buick skirted the obstruction, driving on the wrong side of the bumpy street.

As the black-and-white slued through to the further end of the repair area, Shayne was able to get in two shots. The

behavior of the men in the black-and-white had convinced him they were not cops. He heard the scream of a blownout tire, followed by a wild skid and the crunch of metal as the fleeing car crashed into a telephone pole.

Then the detective was forced to battle his own wheel as the Buick's right front wheel caught the lip of the excavation and yawed wildly from side to side. Shayne was able to brake to a halt but, for several seconds, was unable to give attention to the car he was pursuing.

When he got things under control, he leapt from the Buick, automatic at the ready, in time to see a single man, with a desperate burst of speed, sprint out of sight around a corner. Shayne reached the corner too late. The running man had vanished.

Pursuit on foot was out of the question. There was no way of telling where he might have gotten away to. Mike Shayne walked back to the black-and-white, his gun still cocked and ready.

### III

LEN STURGIS WAS frothing mad. The Chief of Detectives for Miami seemed to swell behind his Police Headquarters desk like an enraged

bullfrog rapidly approaching the point of spontaneous combustion.

"Goddammit, Shayne!" He spoke between gritted teeth. "God dammit, Shayne! Two men dead, one in flight. A pair of the city's finest caught like kids at a picnic and trussed up like Thanksgiving turkeys! A Police weapon employed for a mob execution from a stolen police vehicle right on front of your Goddam nose, and you expect me to feel good about it?"

He closed his eyes, took a couple of deep breaths, then said in a voice that no longer roared but trembled, "And you won't even cooperate to the extent of telling us what in hell you're working on..."

"If you'll cool down long enough to listen, Len," the red-head replied with all the patience he could muster, "you'll realize that I am not refusing to cooperate. I don't know which way is up, that's all."

"That's *all*?" Len Strugis' sarcasm fell with sledgehammer subtlety. "You know don't know which way is up?" He shook his big homely head, repeated, "And that's *all*?"

"Len," Shayne decided to bend the truth a trifle, "I was coming in to see you tomorrow. I only got the assignment this evening. I'm trying to find a missing girl, something you fel-

lows are equipped to do a lot better than I am. I know from nothing about gang executions."

"*Hah!*" Sturgis was silent a long moment, digesting what the redhead had just told him. Then he said, "You wouldn't like to let us have the name of your employer in this oh-so-innocent look for a missing girl, would you, Mike?"

"Come on, Len. You know better than to ask me that." Shayne spoke mildly enough.

The angry chief of detectives uttered a four-letter word, then said, his eyes reduced to the size of B-B pellets, "One of these days, Mike, you keep on like you're going and you're gonna wake up one day with a license."

"I'll want you to be the first to know." Shayne smiled, then held up a hand to forestall further fury, added, "Len, just what kind of mob execution did I get caught up in?"

Having vented his anger on the redhead as the nearest available object, the chief of detective's tone became more reasonable.

"Mike," he said, "you know we've got a real rugged situation developing in the city. We've got ourselves three organizations—count 'em, Mike, *three!*—trying to get control here in Miami. Not to mention

the free lance and splinter groups."

"Three?" Shayne countered. He frowned briefly, then said, "You mean the Organization and who else—the Cuban-Spanish mob? That's only two unless my finger counting is wrong."

"Not so." Sturgis shook his leonine head. "We've got the West Coast-Mexican Mafia moving in. They've got all that dope-running loot and they're itching to turn a profit on some of it. We're sitting on top of a nuclear device that's going up any second."

"I didn't realize it was that bad, Len." Shayne's tone held genuine sympathy.

"It's worse." The chief of detectives looked his grimness. "So what about this caper of yours, Mike? Does it tie in?"

The redhead shrugged. "I can't tell yet—honest." Shayne leaned forward toward Sturgis, said, "I'm looking for a girl, name of Michelle Lamont? You got a make on her?"

Sturgis laid both hamlike hands palm down on his desk blotter, stared at Shayne oddly for a long moment, then punched a button and spoke into the voice-box at his elbow. "Bring in what you've got on Michelle Lamont," he ordered.

"You wouldn't be kidding me, would you, Mike?" he asked.

Shayne shook his red head, countered with, "What in hell does *that* mean?"

Moments later, a uniformed officer laid a thin folder on Sturgis' desk. After a brief perusal of its contents, the chief of detectives looked up at the redhead and said, "Boiled down, it comes to this... at one-seventeen

Wednesday morning—that's the night before last—a car crashed a lamppost four blocks west of the Barracuda. That's a nightclub catering mainly to rich Cuban emigrés and tourists on the fringe of the Latin quarter right here in downtown Miami."

"I've heard of it—never been there," said Shayne.

"A slick operation—mob financed, of course—the California-Mexican mob," said Sturgis. "Michelle Lamont had been there with a character named Manoel 'Noel' Fonseca. The car was registered in his name, a Jaguar Type. It was totaled. Nobody saw how it happened but plenty of people heard the crash."

"Was Lamont in the car?"

The chief of detectives spread his hands and shrugged, said, "We don't know who was in it. It was empty when Traffic got there."

"What about Fonseca, Len?"

"The son of a bitch is hiding

behind a diplomatic passport from one of these cockamamie West Indian republics, Mike. He claims to know, from nothing. All we got was one phone call from him on Wednesday. We haven't been able to talk to him since. We don't even know if he's still in town—or in the country, for that matter."

"Weird." Shayne shook his craggy red head.

"You can say that again. And that's just for openers."

"What about Lamont?" The redhead pressed.

"Her handbag was in the car. Passport, makeup, employment registration, money—the works."

"How much money?" the redhead asked.

Sturgis' left eyebrow rose. After a moment, he said, "Ninety-five dollars and change—if it's important. Is it, Mike?"

Shayne said, "Damned if I know. Nothing else?"

"Nothing."

"Did you talk to her employer, Len?"

"Orla Rubens, the cosmetics queen? We tried. She has not been available so far. Except for the bag and the waiter and ladies room attendant at the Barracuda, it's as if Michelle Lamont never existed. According to her passport visás,



though, she's a real traveling lady."

He paused again, folded the file, laid his hands flat on the desk. "And now you get involved in this damned shooting tonight and come in and ask for her. Mike, what in hell's going on?"

"Believe me, Len, I don't know—yet. I agreed to look for Michelle Lamont around nine o'clock this evening. I went to my office to read up on her. I was either tailed or picked up there by the poor bastard in the Mustang who got wasted outside my apartment house. He followed me there and I was just about to brace him when those jokers in the stolen police car put him out of the running. So help me, that's all."

"That's all, Mike—you're sure? What about the name of your employer?"

"You know the rules, Len. If I told you now, I'd be putting myself out of business."

"Yeah, yeah." Sturgis fixed the redhead with a laser-beam stare. "I know the whole song and dance. Hell, I ought to—I've had to listen to it often enough. But if I find you're shading the law in any way, I'll put you out of business myself."

"Cool it, Len. If I find myself walking the wrong side of the street, you'll be the first to know." Shayne shook his red

head, added, "I wonder why our mysterious friend Lamont is such a hot pistol. Or if she's an innocent victim of circumstances that have not come to light yet."

"Anything's possible," said the chief of detectives, "however unlikely. But if she is innocent, she's got to be a regular Typhoid Mary. Those two hoods who got blown away tonight weren't exactly Snow Whites. And this Fonseca character Lamont was with at the club is no angel—though a lot of women seem to think so. He's got quite a rep as an international Lothario."

"Rich?"

"That's another little problem that's been puzzling a lot of people over the last five years or so—including Internal Revenue. He spends money like it was going out of fashion—but his only reported income is his diplomatic salary, which is peanuts. Incidentally, he paid for the Jaguar that was totalled in cash—twenty-four thousand bucks. Somebody's bankrolling him."

"Sounds likely." Shayne ran a thumbnail along the edge of his jaw, said, "I wonder why they rubbed out the joker who was tailing me."

Sturgis exhaled loudly, said, "Maybe somebody didn't like his tortillas—or maybe he was

trying to tell you something and somebody didn't want you to know. Hell man, it's beginning to look like open season."

He pushed back his chair, stood up, adjusted his trousers, said, "Be careful, Mike. I wasn't kidding when I said I'd have your badge if you cross us."

The redhead walked to the door, turned, said, "Len, it never occurred to me that you were."

He went home and went to bed...

#### IV

SHAYNE WAS ROUTED out of deep slumber by the repeated ringing of the telephone. He picked up the bedside instrument, growled, "Mike Shayne speaking," to discover he was talking to the dial tone. The ringing that had wakened him persisted. It came from the house phone in the other room.

Naked and uttering a string of irked obscenities, the redhead padded out to the entry of his apartment and lifted the handset from the small table just inside the hall door.

The desk man downstairs spoke apologetically. "Mr. Shayne, I'm sorry but there's a young lady on her way up to your rooms. I tried to stop her, but—"

"Okay, forget it." Still growl-



ing, the detective trotted back to the bedroom to don a tartan flannel robe, a gift from Lucy Hamilton on his last birthday. Before he could get back to the door, its bell was issuing its soft summons.

The tall blonde from Orla Rubens' establishment stood there. She was wearing as before a black velveteen jump

suit, an arresting figure with a strikingly exotic face framed by a disciplined swirl of short amber hair in striking contrast to a pair of long, rather narrow green eyes.

She said, "*Ma-dam* wants to see you, Shayne."

It was the first time the red-head had heard her speak—and if her appearance was exotic, her voice sounded straight off the farm. Not some Eastern European agricultural area but right off the Iowa-Kansas cob.

All Shayne could think of to say was, "Okay, I'll call her."

"She wants to see you—right away, Shayne."

He blinked, still bleary with sleep, massaged his throat between thumb and forefinger, croaked, "Coffee?"

"Later."

If Shayne's client *looked* like Napoleon, her jum-suited emissary *behaved* like the long-dead emperor of the French. He made a hasty toilet, ran an electric razor over the stubble on his cheeks and chin, threw on some clothes and rejoined her, feeling like the proverbial south end of a north-bound horse.

Out of habit, he punched the elevator button for the basement garage. The tall blonde repunched, told him, "Gaston is waiting."

Moments later, he found

himself sharing with her the rear seat of what had to be one of the most expensive cars in Miami, a perfectly preserved Rolls Royce custom built Silver Phantom of pre-1964 splendor.

Impressed in spite of himself, he turned to his companion and said, "What's your name?"

"Nadja," was the reply in the corn-fed voice.

*Nadja, my foot!* He thought, decided not to explore the subject further. They rode the rest of the way in silence. The red-head decided he preferred his companion as a mute.

Orla Rubens received him sitting on the same Empire settee beneath the same two portraits of the imperial consorts, wearing either the same purple robe embroidered with golden bees or a replica thereof. Shayne had the eerie sensation of never having left the windowless room.

Nadja produced the coffee, served in gold-and-purple porcelain, with incredible speed after her first greeting, then left them alone as before. Although the cosmetic czarina's face wore no visible change of expression, the detective sensed that she was intensely displeased.

She said, after he had taken a first restorative sip of richly bitter black brew, "Mr. Shayne, I was informed by our friend Hannes Logan that you were a

man capable of making discreet inquiries. How then, unless the television reports are false, have you managed to become involved in a public shooting immediately after departing these premises last night?"

Tersely, the redhead related what had happened after he left the cosmetics headquarters. After describing his visit with Len Sturgis, he concluded, "The only things I didn't tell him were the money you found and the fact you were my employer—and, since Sturgis is not a fool, he must already have figured that out."

She stirred her coffee with a golden spoon capped by an imperial crown, said in her rich rasping voice, "I see." Her frown deepened. "And I do not like what I see."

"Neither do I," he snapped. "If you are dissatisfied with my services, Ma-dam, you are free to consider them terminated as of this moment."

A smile upturned the corners of the small, sensuous mouth. The handsome round head was shaken slightly. Then, "On the contrary, Mr. Shayne, it is I who feel obligated. I seem to have involved you without adequate preparation in a situation that has already put you in danger."

"It goes with the job." Unaccountably, the Miami redhead

felt gratified, even though long experience told him he was being stroked.

"Actually, you have done very well. I had no idea Michelle was involved with that snake Fonseca—if, indeed, she is. If so, it is her very first lapse in taste of that nature."

He said, "Do you know him?"

"I have met him." She shrugged, looked thoughtful. "He is handsome—a sleek, lean flanked greyhound, with a greyhound's animal appetites and none of his virtues."

Then, after another pause, "What do you plan to do next, Shayne?"

"Find Michelle—alive, if possible—before the police do," he told her.

"I do not think the police will find her," the czarina replied. "Not if what you tell me is true—which I fear it is. Innocent or not, she is too deeply involved."

"You could be right."

"If I can be of any help then..." Orla Rubens let it hang. Then, "I shall not bother you again, but I shall keep myself available until this is cleared up, one way or another. You have my private phone number."

"I do." The detective sensed dismissal in her tone. He rose.

She said, "Gaston will drive you wherever you wish to go."

Mike Shayne rode back to his aging apartment hotel in style, feeling like a very ordinary mutt in a blue-ribbon setting. It was, he thought, about time he began earning his two-hundred a day-plus retainer with some positive action.

The only problem was *what* action...

The fulcrum of the case, Shayne felt certain, was the 400 gees his employer had found in the attaché case in Michelle Lamont's closet. In an inflated era of credit cards and unlimited checking accounts, such a sum in cash could represent far more than its value in legal tender.

If it happened to be "laundered" money—and the redhead had, from the moment he saw it, felt quite certain that it was either laundered or on the way to be, thus making it clean as far as income tax or other records went—it might well be crucial even in the wealth-swollen altitudes of organized crime.

Somebody wanted that money, wanted it badly enough to kidnap or kill. The problem was, who?

After retrieving his Buick, Shayne pondered it. He stopped en route to the office for a hearty breakfast in one of the older restaurants of Downtown Miami, enjoying papaya juice, a thick, rare club steak with a

trio of gently fried eggs and real, not processed, hashed browns and split toasted French rolls with sweet butter, plus excellent coffee.

One explanation for the money being in Michelle's closet, plus the French girl's unaccounted-for absences, past and present, lay in the possibility that she was moonlighting as a "bagwoman" from her Orla Rubens secretarial chores.

The late Virginia Hill had been such a courier for the Organization in bygone years, transporting huge sums of money from place to place, from person to person, taking orders from gangland's top echelons. As a rule, the underworld sought less conspicuous bank messengers, paid them well, protected them under an unwritten immunity from interference.

Noel Fonseca, Shayne suspected, might well be such a courier. It would account, at least in part, for his unexplained income. His international playboy reputation would provide invaluable cover in such a role.

Shayne decided he was going to have to have a talk with the elusive glamour boy. After all, he had been Michelle Lamont's last known companion in public.

He downed the last of his cof-

fee, paid his check, then drove to his Flagler Street office.

There were also, he thought as he slid the Buick into its parking slot behind the modest two-story office building, the little problems of why he had been followed home the night before and why his tail had been so spectacularly wasted.

Lucy sat demurely behind her desk as Mike Shayne entered although the outer office was jammed with reporters and cameraman, who clamored for a story and pictures the moment he entered. It took a good twenty minutes to get rid of them with such scraps of information as he felt entitled to reveal.

Not until the last of them was gone did Lucy tell him, "Michael, there's a gentleman waiting in the inner office. He said it was important but wouldn't give his name. Said you'd know him when you saw him."

It seemed an unlikely ploy for a hit-man, but all the same Shayne held a hand close to his shoulder holster before pushing on inside.

## V

THE BURLY, MIDDLE-AGED man perched on a corner of the detective's desk lifted a heavy dark eyebrow beneath the snap

brim of his fedora as Mike Shayne entered the inner office.

"They all gone?" he asked in an unexpectedly light, high tenor voice. And, at the red-head's nod, "A good thing that girl of yours is quick on the uptake. She hustled me in here a split second ahead of the boys."

"Okay, Joe," said Shayne, settling in the swivel chair behind his desk, "to what do I owe the honor of this visit?"

Joe Tacoma sat down in one of the two chairs across the desk. A second-echelon Organization executive, not even his \$400 Italian silk suit could disguise the fact that here was muscle, muscle that had risen the hard way from the lowest ranks of the mob over a small mountain of broken heads and wasted bodies. Although he and Shayne had developed a nodding acquaintance over the years, chiefly at sporting events, it was the first time their paths had crossed.

"Shayne," said Joe Tacoma, fingering a sharp crease in his left trouser leg between thumb and forefinger, "We hear you're looking for the Lamont broad. So are we."

Tacoma didn't amplify the "we"—he didn't need to. He was talking about the mob and knew the detective knew it.

"Soooo...?" Shayne dragged it out.

Tacoma frowned, made a gesture of dissatisfaction. He said, "We're not asking you to sell out. We know your reputation. It's just we're working the same street, so maybe..." He let it hang.

Over the years, Mike Shayne had learned to make a tool of his temper, keeping a tight rein on it when apparently losing it, using it only to serve his clients' ends. But this covert proposition, coming from such a quarter after the events of the past eighteen hours, caused the redheaded Irish in him to erupt. Not until he had blasted Joe Tacoma out of his office was he able to regain any semblance of his normal cool.

After slamming the outer office door behind a mob executive in full flight, he took a deep breath and turned to find Lucy regarding him quizzically.

"Do you think that was wise, Michael?" she asked.

"Probably not," Shayne shook his head. "But the son of a bitch had the nerve to proposition me."

"What's it all about, Michael? All I know is that you accepted a retainer from Orla Rubens after we closed up last night. When those reporters came barging in wanting to know about a shooting, I was scared."

"Not too scared to get Joe Tacoma out of their way," he

told her. "Thanks, Lucy. I'm damn glad our newshound friends didn't find *him* hanging around this office."

"What's it all about, Mike? I mean, if I'm to be of any use..."

Shayne filled her in. When he had finished, Lucy nibbled the end of her ballpoint, frowned slightly, said, "Do you suppose Joe Tacoma had any leads?"

"If the mob knew *anything* as to Michelle Lamont's whereabouts, they wouldn't have sent Tacoma running to me."

"But if anybody could find her, you'd think the underworld..." She shook her head.

"According to our friend Sturgis, Angel, the underworld is split three ways just now. Plus the fact they don't want the girl a tenth as much as they want the four hundred gees."

"So where are you going to look?" Lucy asked.

"I'm going after Noel Fonseca," Shayne replied. "He's got to have a damned good reason for going to cover."

"You think he's got the girl with him?"

"I don't know, Angel. Probably not. But he just might know where she is. It's worth a try."

"If you get to that beautiful creature"—Lucy paused for a



sigh—"save some of it for me."

Ignoring this remark, the redhead said, "See if you can get Hannes Logan, Lucy. He got us into this. Let's see if he can be of some use. He packs a lot of clout in international circles."

The attorney quickly answered Shayne's call, listened to what the detective wanted, said, "I'll see how much I can find out, Mike. Give me a little time. Call back in about an hour—say twelve o'clock. I'll be in the office till one."

Shayne had barely hung up when the phone rang. Lucy listened, put a hand over the mouthpiece, said, "It's Tim. He sounds peeved."

The redhead's closest friend, ace reporter Tim Rourke of the *Miami Daily News*, was wearing his grip like a prickly fur boa. He said, "Jesus, Mike, you sure do remember your old buddies. I just learned about this latest shooting scrape of yours when I hit the office. Why in hell didn't you call me last night?"

"Because," the detective replied, "you expressly asked me not too. You wanted complete overnight privacy while you savored the charms of this latest bird of yours."

"Oh, Mike—not for a thing like *this*. Jesus, even the TV boys beat us."

"What's the matter, Tim? The broad run out on you?"

"Never mind that." From the tone of Rourke's reply, the redhead judged his friend's planned night of romance had not worked out as anticipated.

"As a matter of act, I *do* want to talk to you, Tim. Can you get to The Beef House right away?"

"If you buy the drinks. You owe me."

"That'll be the day! See you there in fifteen minutes."

Rourke, looking slightly puffy of face and red of eye, was already ensconced in their regular booth at the restaurant when the detective walked in. Patti, the plump and pretty daytime waitress, was in the act of setting a two-fisted boilermaker in front of the lanky reporter as Shayne slid into the opposite side of the booth.

"Bring me the usual, beautiful," the redhead told her, and she departed with a whisk of starched skirts and apron, dimpling at him over her shoulder.

"Aren't you eating?" Rourke asked.

"I had breakfast just now. What about you?"

"I just ordered." The reporter took a long, lingering pull at his beer chaser after downing a good three ounces of rye at a gulp, put down his glass said,

"Okay, Mike, what in hell is going on?"

"That," Shayne told him, "is exactly the question I was going to ask you." Succinctly, he sketched in what had happened since Hannes Logan called him the previous evening. The reporter listened in silence. By the time the detective finished, there was a second boilermaker in front of Tim along with a sizable platter of thick ham, four eggs sunny side up and a good half cord of kindling in the form of German fried potatoes.

Shayne tugged at his left earlobe, said, "What bugs me is the fact that the local underworld is divided in three parts like Caesar's Gaul, and I'm just finding out about it."

"That," said Rourke, pausing to swallow while his Adam's apple danced, "is because you've been mucking around with too many glamour cases of late. If you don't come down to earth, you'll be losing your touch." He paused, shook his long homely head, pursed his lips in a silent whistle, added, "Orla Rubens playing bagwomen for the mob—now *that's* what I call a nice red-hot juicy yarn!"

"You let a word of it pop in print before I give you the nod, and I'll have your worthless hide," Shayne warned him. "How rough is the situation?

Sturgis seemed pretty uptight about it."

"It's plenty rough—and what happened last night may have lit the fuze. La Rubens sitting on four hundred gees of gang loot..." He shook his head again, shoveled another mouthful inside, washed it down with beer, said, "Where do you suppose the Lamont broad is stashed?"

"I haven't an inkling, Tim—not a whisper. I'm trying to get to this Fonseca character. What do you have on him?"

"Nothing good," Rourke replied. "A latter-day Rubirosa. The glamour gals, what's left of them, have been swooning over him for a couple of years now on all continents. Wonder how a crumb like that gets them going for him like that. I'm a fairly honest Joe with a fairly good job, and I have problems getting out of the batter's box with economy-type broads. How does he do it?"

"If you don't know by now, you'll never learn." Shayne's reply was notably unsympathetic.

He looked up as Patti appeared with a telephone and jacked it into place. Hannes Logan's voice greeted Shayne's hello.

"Your girl told me I'd reach you here," he said.

"I was going to call you,"

Shayne told him. "Get anything, Hannes?"

"Not yet. I have a line to Fonseca's legation. Why don't you come over here now? There are a couple of things we ought to talk over."

"I'm on my way."

The attorney's offices featured light colored woods, beige carpeting and leather, and a magnificent picture-window panorama of the Miami Beach skyline on the other shore of the bay. Hannes Logan himself was a lean, sunbronzed, well conditioned man in his middle fifties who regarded the detective with bright blue eyes magnified by tortoise-rimmed glasses.

He said, "Mike, I had no idea I was letting you in for a mess like this when I asked you to go see Orla. I thought it would be a little tidy-up job you could keep out of the papers."

"This things happen, Hannes," Shayne spoke amiably—he liked Logan. "Part of the job. The rates are the same. I probably wouldn't have taken it if business wasn't slack—plus the fact, I figured Lucy would get a charge out of her boss working for Orla Rubens."

A pause, then, "Any word on Fonseca, Hannes? I'd like to talk to that beautiful bullbitch. I've got an idea he could give me some answers."



"So, it seems, have certain other people," Logan told the detective. "My line at the legation tells me Fonseca hasn't shown there at all. He thinks somebody planted the story as a cover—says nobody at the lega-

tion's heard anything. My guess is they're worried."

Shayne tugged at his left ear-lobe again, frowning.

Logan said, "Does it help in any way, Mike?"

"Negative, I'm afraid. But thanks anyway." Mike Shayne stood up, added, "See you around, Hannes..."

## VI

SHAYNE TIMED HIS NEXT move carefully. He had long ago learned that the two most informative times to visit any successful cabaret are in the afternoon, as the place is just opening for business, or late at night, as it is about to close. At those times, the atmosphere is casual, relaxed. In between, the customer is king and all resources of the establishment are dedicated to seeing that he enjoys himself sufficiently to bring money in at the till.

Having learned by telephone that the Barracuda Club bar opened for cocktails at four-thirty p.m., the redhead breezed in alone through the semi-dark premises and made his way to the bar, which fronted an entrance separate from the main body of the restaurant.

A still unlit neon sign over the door labeled it *The Piranha Room*. The bar itself topped a lengthy, illuminated aquarium

full of rocks, sand and live-seaweed in which skulked ugly living specimens of the ferocious little fish.

Ugly but effective, he thought. The killer fish themselves swam tranquilly about. He wondered if they were kept under sedation—also, what they were fed when feeding time fell due.

A single bartender was on duty, a swarthy squat Iberian type busy polishing glasses for the backbar. A lone waiter, looking limp beneath his starched white jacket and shirt, was folding napkins at a mobile service table. It was too early for the office-fleeing cocktail crowd and the only customers were a man and a woman, quietly dressed and talking in tones to match over drinks at the far end of the bar.

Shayne ordered a Martell on the rocks, looked up to find the man eyeing him thoughtfully in the backbar mirror. Moments later, as his drink was served, the detective caught a glimpse of movement out of the corner of an eye, saw the man slip from his red-leather-topped stool and disappear through a door at the rear.

*Hello;* he thought. The detective had a definite sensation of having been recognized and of his presence being reported on. All senses alert, Shayne forced

himself to remain at ease while he lifted his glass and sipped its contents. There was, he thought gratefully, no doubt as to the authenticity of the brandy.

This was better than he had dared hope. At the moment, the Barracuda Club was his sole remaining hope for a lead to the disappearance of Michelle Lamont.

"Mike Shayne?"

The speaker seemed literally to have come out of the woodwork with which the Piranha room was paneled from carpet to ceiling. He was close to six feet tall, dark of hair and complexion, dark of eye. He spoke the detective's name without noticeable accent.

At Shayne's acknowledgement of his identity, he said, "I tried to reach you earlier at your office. Perhaps, if you would come with me. . ."

He was led through a door in the paneling, along a short hallway to a comfortable red-morocco and oak-paneled office, where the speaker revealed himself as Pedro Mendez, owner of the Barracuda Club. The detective recalled Len Sturgis' description of the resort as mob operated, wondered how high up the echelon Pedro Mendez rated.

Soft spoken he might be, but Mendez wasted no time cutting

to the heart of the matter. His eyes had the frost of a Siberian winter.

"Mr. Shayne," he said when they were seated on opposite sides of a large softly glowing desk, "it is my understanding that you are here as an emissary of Madam Orla Rubens. Am I correct?"

The detective hesitated only briefly before saying, "You are."

"Okay, Mr. Shayne. You tell your employer that we have the article she wants returned."

"You have proof?"

In response, Mendez pressed one of a battery of buttons atop the desk. A section of wall to his right slid back to reveal a television screen. Seconds later, it came alive with a color picture of a young woman seated on a bed in what looked like a motel room. As they watched, she tamped out a cigaret in a tray on a bedside table, picked up a high heeled slipper from the carpet at her feet and tested it slowly, as if preparing to use it for a weapon.

There was no question as to her identity. It was Orla Rubens' missing secretary, Michelle Lamont.

Narrow-eyed, the detective looked from the screen to Mendez, said, "How do I know this is not a film?"

Mendez pushed a desk tele-

phone toward him, Dialed digitally, then handed the phone to his visitor. Shayne heard the sound of a ring, saw the girl on the screen stiffen, hesitate, then pick up a telephone beside the ashtray. A clear feminine voice said, "Allo?"

"Miss Lamont?"

"*Oui*. Who is calling?"

"Mike Shayne. Orla has hired me to find you."

A torrent of machine-gun French sounded in the phone. Then, in English, "Get me out of here, whoever you are."

"You are unharmed?"

"So far—*oui*. *Mais je ne connais si*—"

The picture was abruptly turned off. Politely, Mendez plucked the phone from Shayne's hand, replaced it in its cradle on the desk.

"Are you satisfied that we have the girl?" he asked.

Shayne nodded. He said, "What are the conditions for her release?" He felt like pistol-whipping this chilled steel racketeer.

"The price," Mendez told him slowly, "is four hundred thousand dollars. Cash. The deadline is tomorrow noon." He stood up. "I believe this concludes our business, Mr. Shayne. If we do not hear from you within that time, we shall be forced to conclude that your employer has found the girl

expendable—and act accordingly."

The tone was polite enough, the words almost mild in delivery—but the redhead did not for a moment doubt their sincerity. Gritting his teeth at having to bite such a bullet, he let himself be ushered out. He kept his mouth buttoned until he was clear.

The bar was filling up with jovial merrymakers as Shayne made his way silently through it on the way out to his car.

Unless Mendez and his allies were bluffing, Michelle Lamont had about seventeen hours of life remaining to her—and not for a moment did the redhead doubt Mendez' words.

From Tim Rourke, Mike Shayne had learned that the backers of the Barracuda were agents of the Mexican-California mafia, whose well-heeled invasion of the Miami area had already upset the underworld balance. If he needed any further proof that the money in the attaché case was already well laundered mob loot, Mendez' citing of the exact sum as Michelle's ransom clinched it.

In bills that could not be traced, and in cash, \$400,000 was more like \$4,000,000 in actual value.

As Mike Shayne drove away from the well landscaped park-

ing lot of the Barracuda, he found himself caught in heavy rush-hour traffic. He had a nape-of-the-neck sensation that he was again being followed. But, either because of traffic confusion or phenomenal skill on the part of his pursuer, the redhead was unable to nail down any particular following vehicle in his rearview mirror.

He decided to use the special radio telephone with which his Buick was equipped to call his principal and pulled into a crowded shopping center parking lot to do so—preferring this to using a public pay phone. Not that Shayne was expecting further violence by daylight, but a glass booth was highly vulnerable.

As he dialled, he kept his eyes open for signs of his thus-far undetected tail.

The shopping center was evidently both expensive and fashionable. As he waited for an answer, he counted a half dozen Rolls Royces, nine Karmann Ghias and a sexter of Jaguars in his immediate vicinity, among a myriad Mercedes, Cadillacs and Continentals.

It took some little time before Orla answered her private line. When the rich rasping voice finally came on, Shayne gave her a terse graphic account of Michelle's predicament.

He did not recognize the lan-

guage of her immediate response but identified it by its vehemence as an expletive. Then she said, "How much do they want, Mr. Shayne?"

When he told her, her reply was in English and it was very very obscene. Then, in simpler syllables, "Mr. Shayne, I've been trying to reach you. The attaché case has been stolen. The money is gone!"

## VII

MIKE SHAYNE PICKED HER up at the Orla Rubens building and drove her to his office. En route, she said, "Mr. Shayne, at first I was angry when you told me not to drive with Gaston. Old habits die hard. But you drive well. And you are right, of course. There must be a traitor in my household."

He said, "That, I'm afraid, goes without saying. You must know by now what kind of money that four-hundred thou is."

"I'm afraid I've known all along," she admitted. "I didn't face facts, though. I kept hoping." Then, naked fear in the dark eyes, "Michelle—is she all right?"

"She looked okay—she sounded okay."

"Tell me—everything," Orla Rubens begged.

Shayne told her. He was still



telling her when they reached the Flaler Street building, pausing only to answer her occasional to-the-point questions. The aura of concentration she projected was all but paralyzing in its intensity.

For once, the redhead was glad to find the office locked, Lucy gone home. He wanted no interference nor intrusion on their session. As they talked, he was beginning to understand how such a tiny woman could control and dominate a worldwide business of her own creation.

"Why would Michelle be sitting on a bed?" she asked. "She hated to sit on beds. Think about it, Mr. Shayne. What sort of room was she in that would force her to sit on a bed?"

"A room with no other place to sit. Which means. . . ?" the detective inquired.

"Who know at this point?" Orla countered. "But it must mean something. Perhaps. . ." Orla tapped her teeth.

"Okay," said the detective, reaching for the handle of the file drawer containing the brandy bottle. "Let's get down to cases. The California-Mexican Mafia mob have Michelle. They'll let her go for the money. But the money is gone. So what do you want me to do?"

"What do you suggest?" The

tiny dark eyes were like gimlets.

"As I see it, Orla, we have three courses to follow. One, we turn it over to the authorities."

"Then Michelle will die!" Orla shook her Napoleon head.

"Let's say there's a damn good chance of it—not that the local police aren't competent—they are. So is the F.B.I."

"I cannot afford such a chance." The cosmetic czarina's headshake was emphatic.

"Can you afford the money—can you raise four hundred thousand dollars in time?"

"Probably," Orla said. "But it will knock me in the head at this time. It will mean pulling the money out of funds already assigned to our Grey Liberation campaign, a drive to get older people, not just women only, to look more attractive and like themselves better, to enjoy more fully their later decades. We are about to launch the drive on four continents in just a few weeks and putting up the money would throw it out of balance."

"You couldn't borrow it?" the detective asked.

Orla shook her head again, said, "No way," narrowed her little dark eyes, asked, "What is the third course, Shayne?"

For the first time, she dropped the *Mister*. The detective read it as a triple negative

to the two suggestions offered—no *no*, NO!

He said, "The third course is the trickiest of all—we try to get the girl back *without* paying the ransom."

"But..." Orla began. "But..." Then, the tiny dark eyes widening, "You *know* something, Mr. Shayné?"

"Let's say I have some suspicions," Mike Shayne told her. "Nothing definite. But before we go on, I must ask you a couple of questions."

"Shoot," Orla replied. "I'll answer if I can."

"First—how much does Michelle mean to you?"

"A great deal—why?"

"Because, if we fail, she may very well be killed."

"We *shall* not fail—we *can* not fail—we *must* not fail!" The czarina's emphasis was almost frightening. "I trust you, Mike Shayne. I do not trust the police. I do not trust those ferrets holding her. I do not trust my own household any more—I trust you!"

"I hope you're right," said the detective. He finally managed to fill a couple of tumblers with brandy, water and ice, said, "Sorry, no sugar."

She grimaced, lifted her glass in tiny fingers aglitter with jewels and precious metals. "To our cause—the liberation of Michelle!" Then, after taking a



healthy pull at her drink, "What do we do? How can I help?"

"Just sit tight," he told her. "I want to get something started." He reached for the phone.

"Remember—no police," Orla warned him.

He didn't bother to answer. Instead, he picked up the telephone, dialed Lucy, said, "Angel, are you still on speaking terms with that girl who works for the Civic Construction and Planning Office at City Hall?"

"Holly-Ann Davis? She's one of my best friends. Why?"

"As I recall, she works till six—right?" Shayne asked. And, at Lucy's assent, "I want to know the plans in progress for the outfit that built the Barracuda Club. Especially any motel or apartment-house projects. Demo homes. Like that. Can do, Lucy?"

"She'll break my arm, Michael."

"In this case, it's worth it, Angel."

"Where can she reach you?"

"At the office," Shayne assured her.

While they waited, Orla said, "You may wonder why I'm so deeply concerned about Michelle. Well, just between us, the girl is my sister's child. My niece. My sister died before she and Michelle's father could marry. I brought the girl up myself. She doesn't know it, of course, but she's like my own daughter."

Mike Shayne let it hang while he downed a drink, then said, "You realize, of course, that it's ninety-nine to one Michelle has been playing the role of international bagwoman on the side."

"I know." The Napoleonic forehead furrowed. "Michael Shayan, I still can't believe it of Michelle. She had to be somebody's dupe if she did so—perhaps that scum Fonseca, though I find *that* hard to believe."

"Perhaps," Shayne nodded. "But what about the rest of your household, Orla? *Somebody* stole that attaché case *after* Michelle was snatched. That's why I picked you up myself just now. It occurred to me that Gaston might be the one.

After all, as your chauffeur, he has outside contacts."

"Gaston? *Impossible!*" Orla virtually exploded. But then a pair of vertical lines appeared between her eyebrows. "I would swear to his loyalty on a stack of Bibles. Still. . ."

"Exactly," said the detective. "You can exempt nobody. Even Nadja."

"Don't underrate Nadja," Orla retorted. "She has the brain of a lightning calculator. Why, half the time, she anticipates *me*."

"Why the dumb act then?" Shayne inquired.

Orla flashed a brief gamine grin. "If you ever heard her talk, you'd understand."

"But I have. She called on me this morning, remember?"

"Oh? Of course." For once, the cosmetics czarina sounded vague. "That's right—I *did* send her."

"She has to be from the corn belt," said the detective. "She sounds strictly from Iowa."

"Nebraska," Orla replied. "But she's so beautiful. And so useful."

They chatted as the twilight began to fall and enjoyed another drink and then, some forty minutes after the red-head's call to Lucy, the office phone sounded. It was Holly-Ann Davis and she sounded breathless.

"Mr. Shayne, darlin'," she drawled in a deep Georgia accent, "I do believe I've found what Lucy said y'll were after. I found the specifications for everything FloCal Corporation is constructin' and progress reports—and I got them all Xeroxed the way Lucy asked me to. Now, what do I do with them?"

"Honeychile," he replied, "can y'll bring them over here?"

Leaving Orla in the office, Shayne went downstairs ten minutes later and waited on the sidewalk until Holly-Ann drove up in a perky little Ferrari and handed him a long roll of Xerox paper fastened with a rubber band.

Holly-Ann was a devastating brunette but the detective offered her only bare-courtesy attention as he thanked her for her trouble. He was far more interested in the possibility of the office being under surveillance.

He noted neither suspicious cars nor occupants within the confines of the block before returning upstairs.

## VIII

THE FLOCAL CORPORATION's plans were extensive. When Shayne spread out the general map, weighting the corners with books and the desk telephone,

he discovered that they included not only the Barracuda Club and the expensive shopping center from which he had phoned Orla less than two hours earlier, but a marina currently under construction a quarter mile to the east and a housing development to back it up, also unfinished.

Immediately to the rear of the marina, in an apparently otherwise vacant area, was a small corner section devoted to sample houses to be shown to prospective purchasers. There were a dozen modular homes, ranging from small to large, plus a rental office just inside the entrance.

Mob money, Shayne thought, being put to legitimate profit making uses...

"Well...?" Orla asked him when the two of them had finished looking over the plans. "Do they help?"

"They help," he said, "if my thinking is right." Shayne glanced at his watch, added, "My God, Orla, it's almost seven and I haven't eaten since breakfast—can I buy you dinner?"

"It sounds divine," said the cosmetics czarina.

"I want to drop these plans at my apartment," said the detective. "And I'd better change." Indicating his light slacks and bright sports jacket, he added,

"These are a bit bright for the work I have ahead of me. Would you mind?"

"Of course not." She dimpled and flashed her first real smile at him. *My God!* he thought. *She's almost beautiful...*

He wondered where to take her, let it ride. At home, he offered her a drink, which was accepted, then he moved into the bedroom to strip, change and shower. Finished, he called out to her cheerfully that he would be ready in ten minutes but received no answer.

When he emerged, clad in dark shirt, slacks and jacket, Orla was gone. She had left a note, its corner weighted under the corner of her glass. It read—*Sorry, Michael Shayne. I called my home, which was a mistake. I am needed there, alas. Don't worry, Gaston is picking me up downstairs. Be careful tonight—but deliver Michelle from her enemies. It will double your fee. Regretfully, Orla R.*

Oddly enough, the redhead felt regretful, too. Physically, Orla Rubens was no Farrah Fawcett-Majors—but as company she was so stimulating that her companion tended to forget her shortcomings of face and figure. Also to forget shortcomings in what she chose to reveal.

Shayne realize that Orla had

failed to explain her refusal to turn the affair over to the police once the conditions of Michelle's kidnapping and ransom had been made plain—or, if not the police, the F.B.I. Enigma, Shayne thought, was the word for such contradictory behavior.

He wondered if the \$400,000 had, in fact, vanished. And, if it had, where to—or who had been responsible for its disappearance?

As Shayne pondered this behavioral deadlock over a final pre-dinner drink, he studied the plans Holly-Ann had had photocopied for him at Lucy's request.

He knew the area well—though so much of it had been cleared for new development that many familiar landmarks had vanished.

The redhead had to go ahead on the premise he had developed from two leads. One, the fact that Pedro Mendez had been able to establish contact with the missing girl from his Barracuda Club office via some sort of closed television circuit.

Since the housing development was still under construction, Shayne was going ahead with the idea that Michelle was planted in one of the demonstration model homes.

The other lead backed up this assumption. It was Orla's com-

ment that the girl would never have been seated on a bed, dressed and with shoes and stockings, if there were any other place to sit—that it was part of her upbringing as a well-bred young Frenchwoman.

The problems that remained, granted his assumptions were correct, were those of finding the girl and of bringing her out of captivity unharmed.

He went over the Xeroxed floorplans once more, noted for the first time that each demonstration apartment or house had its own number in very small print. At this discovery, Shayne tugged at his left earlobe and felt grim satisfaction. He had watched Menasi closely when he phoned the girl's number. It had been—*one, two, three.*

It constituted a third lead and two leads plus one made three. In his book, three were enough to go ahead on. . .

Instead of dining out, since Orla was no longer with him. Shayne raided the freezer compartment of his refrigerator, which Lucy kept stocked for him. He found a two-inch-thick tenderloin strip, some frozen hashed brown potatoes, some cooked asparagus that would serve with a modest reheating.

While he cooked, and while he ate, the redhead watched available television news re-

ports for any word of development in the Lamont girl's disappearance. There was none. . .

He was in the process of dumping his dishes in the sink when the apartment house telephone buzzed. The desk clerk said. "There's a gentleman on his way up to see you. He got past the desk. I'm sorry, sir."

"Did he give you a name?"

"It sounded like Mr. Spokane, sir."

"Thanks. It's okay." The detective smiled grimly. Joe Tacoma, he thought, might have showed more originality in his choice of a second alias. Two cities in Washington. . . He wondered where Tacoma really came from and what his actual name was.

The fact that he had announced himself at all suggested the Organization mobster did not have immediate annihilation in mind. Shayne went to the door and opened it.

An automatic was shoved into his ribs and a grim voice with traces of Spanish accent said. "Inside, Mr. Shayne—*inside!*"

Too late, the redhead realized he should have asked the desk clerk for a description of his caller. Joe Tacoma, he had been ready for. Noel Fonseca, he was not. Especially a Noel Fonseca

armed and very much on the aggressive. To date, his impression of the international Lothario had been that of a frightened ladies' man very much on the lam.

There was no mistaking his caller. He was tall—taller than Shayne by three or four inches—lithe as an eel and incredibly handsome of feature.

Even in such a moment, the detective could understand the plight of a woman in the presence of such overwhelming masculine comeliness.

Inside, with the door securely shut, still keeping the redhead covered, Fonseca said. "Where's the money?"

Mike Shayne was so flabbergasted by the request that he dropped his hands and could only utter a majestic, "Huh?"

"The money, the pesos, the dinero, *senor*. You have it. I want it. And put your *hands up!*"

His adrenals high, Shayne's mind went into chain-lightning action. This, he thought, was too damned much. He was not armed. After changing, he had donned his shoulder holster but had not put his heavy Colt .45 into it as yet. He was going to have to take this two-legged barracuda unarmed.

There was a maneuver he had learned years before, while taking a refresher course in

commando rough and tumble, that seemed to fit the picture, a maneuver known as "slide, Kelly, slide."

Shayne decided to apply it.

Even while his arms were still rising, holding the visitor's attention, he leapt forward and sideways, feet first, falling away to the left while Fonseca's ugly revolver was on the rise.

His left shoe hooked the glamour goy's right ankle even as, with his right heel, Shayne delivered a shattering blow to the intruder's right kneecap. Fonseca uttered a help of anguish and fell backwards. His revolver described an arc through the air as it left his first unfired.

The ladies' man's fall backward caused his head to strike the sharp angle of the door jamb with a loud crack. He went down for the full count, dead to the world.

Shayne scrambled to his feet and retrieved the handgun, a Baretta 7-millimeter apparently in good working condition. He hefted it, thrust it into a jacket pocket, examined the unconscious intruder, who had begun to snore faintly.

Shayne judged he would not come out of it for at least ten minutes, but took the time to bind Fonseca securely, with his ankles tied together and his hands behind his back. Then he



went to the telephone and dialed Homicide, asked for and got Len Sturgis.

"You still want Noel Fonseca, Len?" he asked. And, to the Chief of Detectives' vehement affirmative, "We'll he's in my apartment, waiting for you. I'll leave the door unlocked. You can pick up his piece from the desk clerk on your way in."

"Where the hell do you think you're going?" Sturgis roared.

"Out," Shayne told him. "And don't say I never cooperate."

He hung up, put the Baretta in a manila envelope, left it at the desk, told the clerk the police were coming to pick up his visitor and went on down to the basement garage where his Buick awaited him.

It was time to roll. . .

## IX

HAVING GOT HIS CAR out of the garage, Shayne drove discreetly around the block and parked just off Second Street, where he had an angled view of his own apartment. He turned off his lights but kept the motor running.

Within three minutes of taking up this positio, the redhead heard the growl of approaching sirens. Two patrol cars rolled to a halt in front of his building with lights flashing as they braked to a halt. Smiling



faintly, the big detective got quietly under way once more and eased toward the target area, moving with the flow of lessening middle evening traffic.

The swank shopping center was still going full blast, as was the Barracuda Club two blocks beyond. Shayne drove past them, turned left into an area where wreckers and graders had been at work. Between the club and the bay shore, save for new construction on the waterfront, all buildings were leveled.

Intersecting streets were closed off and the entire construction zone was surrounded by a steel link fence. The two gates the redhead spotted were

guarded by workers' shacks with night lights glowing. He felt reluctant admiration for the thoroughness with which the well financed West Coast Mafia had planned and was executing its transcontinental operation in enemy territory.

The only through passage lay along the bay shore itself, and Shayne drove slowly north on it. Here, too, steel fencing protected the area and the only completed construction was a relatively small area in which, by the glow of the surrounding city lights, the redhead could see a small cluster of new buildings of varied sizes and shapes.

The renting office with its sample dwellings lay on the merina side of the road and the redhead drove slowly by, casing it for possibly entry spots and finding none. Here were no workers' construction shacks but a locked mesh gate with a uniformed guard on duty.

Shayne drove on until, two hundred yards beyond it, he found an off-the-road emergency parking area and pulled the Buick in and locked it. He only hoped that his car would not be spotted by Traffic Control and towed away before he got back to it.

He was going to have to make his approach via the wterfront. Checking his gun in

its holster, he slid out of the Buick and began picking his way along uneven ground, churned by heavy construction machinery and slippery with bay mud. Occasional piles of lumber offered the only cover and the redhead was forced to use them as best he could to remain unobserved. He only hoped he would not encounter any guard dogs.

He progressed approximately 150 yards southward before he approached another of the ubiquitous steel mesh fences, this one running into the bay itself. Shayne tugged at his earlobe.

He was going to have to take to the water. Nor did he dare remove his shoes lest he cut his feet on submerged broken glass or metal. It was soggy, sloppy going. Luckily, the tide was close to high and the top of the fence was submerged less than ten yards offshore, enabling him to half-swim, half-sprawl over it.

The north end of the sample housing area rose in front of him, the approach simplified by a single small marina jetty thrusting into the bay. A pair of small motor launches lay moored to the pier.

He scrambled over the side into one of them and was leaning forward to check its dashboard in search of an igni-

on key when a damp rubber wheel skidded on sleek varnished surface and deposited the detective ignominiously on his rump.

The fall did not trouble him at the possibility of the noise made by his 190-pound body. For long moments, he crouched low, holding his breath, awaiting sounds of alarm from the sample buildings less than sixty feet away.

He had just concluded all was well when a male voice growled, "Hey, Juan—you hear something? A thump?"

"You getting the jumps, Joe?" Another male voice spoke. "There ain't nothin' out there. So cool it. We're told to watch the road."

"I dunno..." Juan's voice subsided. There were sounds of motion from the inland area.

There was also, more softly, sounds of human movement from along the shore to the south. The detective drew his heavy handgun and released the safety catch as he crouched even lower, listening.

A boat-hull thudded softly against the other side of the jetty and there were rustling noises as it was made fast. From his own side of the little pier, Shayne lifted himself cautiously to get a look.

Three silhouettes showed briefly against the night-glow of the city sky, to be blotted out

by the shadow of the sample buildings as they approached it. The detective remained for the moment where he was, pondering their unexpected presence.

One of the shapes was the burly form of Joe Tacoma, Organization representative. The other two were unrecognizable.

From the fact of their presence here on this particular night, the redhead deduced that there was a deadline at stake. This deduction was backed by Pedro Mendez' deadline for the payment of ransom on the morrow. Shayne judged the money was needed desperately to seal up some inter-organizational concession—and that the third underworld group would go to any lengths to halt it.

His guess was that the Cuban and Organization forces were dealing to keep the West Coast group from further infiltration. But that conjecture he shelved—there would be time to check it out later.

There was little time for conjecture now.

He sensed impending violence with the girl in the midst of it. Evidently, Michele Lamont's person was considered sound security.

For a fleeting instant, the detective pondered Noel Fonseca using a transparent alias for Joe Tacoma to gain admission to his apartment. If Shayne had

not collared the glamour boy, the police would have believed Tacoma and his Organization had wiped out one redhead.

Joe Spokane . . . ridiculous, yes—but good for its intended purpose. He wondered if Fonseca had come up with it himself, shunted the thought aside. Again, he could check it out later . . . and time was running out here.

There was the sound of male voices from the area of demonstration homes, a curse, then the unmistakable *thock* of a silenced handgun, followed by a grunt as it struck its target.

The redhead vaulted onto the dock just as a man's head rose from the launch moored to its other side. The man, evidently doing rear-guard duty for Tacoma's operation, saw Shayne and opened his mouth to yell.

The detective closed it with a toe to the jaw that sent its owner over backwards to splash in the quiet bay.

Mike Shayne did not wait to witness the man's fate. He sprinted the length of the short jetty, crouched low, gun at the ready. But from the sound of increasing violence ahead, it was evident there was no one watching the small pier.

As he ran, the detective reviewed mentally the architect's blueprint of the demonstration

home area he had studied that afternoon. The building with *Home 123* in it lay to his left on the south side of the unit. The action lay to his right and straight ahead.

He judged the Tacoma forces were trying to force their way toward the girl's apartment while Juan's defenders were seeking to block their determined efforts.

Two more silenced shots *thocked* in quick succession and Shayne was close enough to hear the bullets ricochet. Evidently neither shot found its target but one of them whined too close to the detective's head for comfort.

The demonstration buildings were laid out on either side of a sanded walk running north and south, five in a contiguous row on the far side ahead of him, four in blocks of two each flanking the head of the jetty. Shayne saw a brief flicker of flame from the second story window of a town house across the sanded walk, just to his left, heard answering up-fire from his right as he raced around the corner.

With a swinging hip Shayne crashed the door of the two story building to his left, leaving a cry of alarm and recognition behind him as he raced up carpeted stairs and moved directly to the locked door of the

apartment which bore the number 123.

Unless the detective had lost his ability to read a digital dial upside down, those were the numerals Pedro Mendez had ticked in his Club Barracuda office to put Mike Shayne in contact with the missing girl that afternoon.

Again Mike Shayne swung his hip at a door and shattered its lock and again he half-stumbled inside—to be nearly floored by a well-wielded slipper whose heel struck him just behind the left ear, missing his mastoid by a mere fraction of an inch. . .

## X

HE GRABBED THE GIRL'S arm quickly before she could hit him again, tightened his hold on her wrist with his left hand until the slipper dropped. She faced him, furious, frightened, her deep breaths threatening to burst the fabric of her rumpled white silk shirt.

"I'm Mike Shayne," he said. "Orla sent me. Do you want to get out of here alive or don't you?"

She came out of it slowly, her eyes regaining focus. Even in physical and emotional disarray, she was an appealing, almost a beautiful young woman.

She burst into rapid French,

then paused and said, "How do I know you are. . . ?" Her eyes widened, narrowed, then she said, "I saw you on the screen today."

"Right," he told her. "You saw me. Now, once again, do you want to get out of here alive?"

Her breathing subsided. In quieter tones, she said, "What do you think, Mister Shayne? Of course, I do. But how? They are all around us."

"They're fighting each other," he told her.

But the warfare outside seemed to have stopped or at least paused. The detective went to the window, looked out. He saw a small group of men huddled in the center of the T where the head of the jetty met the brief demo-house area walk. He recognized Joe Tacoma's bulky form once more.

Somebody spotted Shayne at the window, shouted alarm and sent a bullet winging his way. It struck the window frame just above his head, but he did not flinch. Instead, he returned a single shot, dropping the man with a shattered kneecap, howling in agony.

The group scattered and vanished.

"You see?" said the girl, now at his elbow. "There is no way out."

Moments later, the closed-

circuit TV screen on the room's far wall flicked on to reveal Pedro Mendez digital-dialing. Shayne picked up the room phone, said, "Hello, Pedro."

Mendez said, soft as silk, "We don't want any trouble, Shayne. You can't get out. We have no beef with you. In fact, we owe you a favor for getting Fonseca out of our hair. So you are free to go."

"With the girl—it's a deal," the detective told him.

Mendez shook his head. "No deal, Shayne. The girl stays—unless you have the money."

"Fonseca seemed to think I have it," the redhead replied. "Look where it got *him*."

"I'm aware of what happened to Fonseca. But it's you alone or no dice."

The dickering continued and Shayne, hearing a whisper of noise downstairs, motioned the girl to the hall and cut off the screen. He said, "I think they're coming in. Yell when you hear one of them hit the stairs."

She nodded, went into the hall. Shayne turned the closed-circuit-TV on again, said, "Sorry, Mendez, a little trouble with the digitals. 'We're a package, Miss Lamont and I. We go together—or we stay together.'"

"Okay, Shayne." Mendez sounded resigned. "We don't want any more trouble. So..."

Michelle called out and the redhead, yelling, "You just bought yourself some," went into the hall, gun in hand. A head appeared at the top of the stairwell and he put a bullet right through Joe Tacoma's snap-brim fedora, removing it from his head along with a strip of hair with scalp attached.

Tacoma yelled and fell backwards, taking a number of his companions along to judge from the thumps of falling bodies, cries of alarm and curses.

"Stay out there." Shayne returned to the room briefly to look out the window. No one emerged onto the walk but his look drew two near-misses from a sniper apparently stationed behind a second story window across the street. Tacoma and company were evidently still inside the house belowstairs.

The redhead returned to the hall after checking his clip and readying the spare for quick replacement. There were moans from below, an indistinct murmur of voices. He heard Joe Tacoma cry, "*Ouch*, you bastard! That *hurts!*"

Evidently, first aid was being given.

Michelle came close to him, whispered, "What will they do now, Mr. Shayne?"

"I don't know," he replied.

"But how can we get out with

them all around?" The anxiety in her dark eyes touched him. He put an arm around her waist.

"There's only one way, honey," he replied. "If they don't do it for us, we'll have to do it ourselves."

"I don't understand," she said.

"You will, honey—you will," he assured her.

With the two groups of underworld soldiers temporarily united, the detective knew he was hopelessly outnumbered. He was going to have to get help from outside or they would soon be at the mercy of the men who surrounded them.

Shayne went back in the room, tried to reach Mendez for a final dickering session. But the screen remained dark. Evidently the West Coast don had decided the time for dickering was ended and turned off the intercom.

Shayne felt a sudden shaft of concern until he noted that the room lights were still on. He moved to the window again, drew another two rounds of silenced gunfire, did not bother to return it this time. If what he had in mind failed to work, he was going to need every slug he had left.

Back in the hall, Michelle was waiting. The detective appreciated the fact that she had



stuck to the post he assigned her without his having to repeat the order. He wondered why Orla was willing to risk her niece's life rather than pay the ransom. But he was sure the czarina had her reasons.

Shushing Michelle, the red-head moved along the hall in the semi-darkness, studying it carefully. There was evidently a sentinel at the foot of the stairs, for as Shayne slithered swiftly past it, a shot buried itself in the ceiling behind him.

Just beyond the stairs was dumb waiter. A tray of half

consumed food reposed within it. He glanced at Michelle, who nodded from her post, said, "Oh, they fed me well enough, but I was not hungry."

He said, still looking further, "Why, in hell did you let Fonseca bring you to the Barricuda?"

"He told me it was to keep Madame out of trouble. Something about a show of faith. It seemed all right until we left the club. Then they came after us. It was horrible. We hit a tree and I blacked out. When I came to, I was in the room..."

"Okay," he said, "what about those absences of yours that had Orla worried. In Europe and here and in Rio. Did you know what you were doing?"

"Not then," Michelle said. "I thought it was a favor for Madame again, delivering packages for her. Nadja told me—"

"Nadja told you?"

The girl nodded and Mike Shayne began to see the pattern not only of what had happened in the past twenty-four hours but of the whole case. Also, he began to get a glimmering of why Fonseca had come to his apartment for the money. Nadja must have lifted it from Orla's room and brought it with her when she visited him that morning. There had been ample opportunity to stash the attaché case inside

his pad while he showered to return with her and Gaston in the Rolls.

But how had Fonseca found out? The redhead's lips tightened as he realized that the corn-pone blonde with the sealed lips was the real connection between the cosmetics czarina's entourage and the underworld.

A psst from Michelle snapped him out of it. She whispered, "I think they're getting ready to try something."

This time Mendez' soft Spanish-California accents sounded from the foot of the stairs. He said, "Come on, Shayne, play ball. You aren't going anywhere."

"Neither are you," the detective replied, remaining out of sight to those below.

"Okay, okay," the mob don conceded. "You can't get away, and we can't get you—for a while. But *you* are free to go whenever you choose."

"Both of us?"

"Don't be foolish."

"Then forget it."

Michelle broke the ensuing silence. "Perhaps..." she began.

He shook his head, said, "Their word's no good under these circumstances. Come on, I think we've been here just about long enough. Are you ready to leave, Michelle?"

"Are you crazy?"



"Perhaps." But the redhead had long since found what he was looking for. It was not where it was marked on the Xeroxed map but further along the upper hall and on the other side.

Using the butt of his .45 as a hammer, Mike Shayne smashed the glass in the silent fire alarm and gave the handle a hard yank.

## XI

THEY TRIED TO RUSH the stairs once more before the big red fire engines began pulling up around the demonstration area of the development. This effort, the redhead halted with a couple of carefully placed bullet that brought down two more of their besiegers with leg wounds.

When the firemen tried to enter the area to check out the alarm, there was resistance by Pedro Mendez, which Shayne ended by firing a couple of bullets well over the fire captain's head.

This, of course, brought the police.

By then, the two groups of mob soldiers had evaporated, leaving behind three of their membership too seriously wounded to walk. Shayne and Michelle were able to come down unmolested, although

they were forced to await the arrival of Miami's finest.

Shayne was permitted to drive Michelle in his own car to headquarters, where Captain Len Sturgis received them with a mixture of polite solicitude toward the Frenchwoman and baffled exasperation toward Shayne.

Eyeing the latter's bedraggled condition when he entered the Chief of Detectives growled, "You look like something the cat refused to drag in." Then, to Michelle, "Are you all right, young lady?"

When *Mlle.* Lamont had been sent home with a police escort, Sturgis looked at the redhead and shook his massive head and said, "I suppose I ought to thank you for giving us Fonseca as well as getting Lamont out of that demo unit unharmed—but I still keep getting the damndest feeling I've been had."

"And so you have, Len," Shayne assured him. "By the way, how many of the soldiers have you been able to put under wraps?"

As if in answer, the dark buzzer sounded and Sturgis flipped on the intercom, listened, said, "Okay, bring him in." Then, to Shayne, "We just picked up Mendez at a private airport. The California Mafia operation is in a shambles—

thanks again, I suppose, to your illegal efforts."

"Ah, Len," said the redhead. "I think you're jealous."

The chief of detectives tousled his hair, scowled, then looked at Mike Shayne and said, "You know, Mike, maybe I am at that. I can't figure out a single mistake you made in wrapping this one up."

"Who said it's wrapped up?" the redhead countered.

"What's left?"

"A couple of very loose ends," Shayne assured him. "If you can tear yourself away from that throne of yours for an hour or two, why not come along with me and help tie them together?"

"You know I can't..." The big chief of detectives let it hang, then slammed both palms down hard on his desk and said, "Why the hell not?"

They rode to Mike Shayne's apartment in his car with Sturgis filling the front passenger's seat to overflowing, took the elevator up from the basement garage to his apartment. Inside, the redhead poured them both a drink, then, before changing his clothes, went on a search of the rooms.

"What in hell are you looking for?" Sturgis asked. "It must be something damned important to keep you away from your own booze."

"I am looking," Shayne called back from the entryway, "for a black leather attaché case."

"My God!" the chief of detectives called back. "You mean it's *here*?"

"It's almost got to be," Shayne assured him.

He was looking through the closet in the narrow way between entryway and kitchen when he found it, under a layer of dirty shirts and pajamas and bedding under the bottom shelf, bore it back to the living room in triumph.

"I'll be damned!" said Sturgis. "Open it up and let's have a look at it."

Mike Shayne laid it on the coffee table between them and unfastened the clasps. They were not locked. When the two men peered inside, they found themselves looking at a number of 'rumpled towels and washclothes.

"Son of a bitch!" the redhead exclaimed. "I wondered who took my laundry bag. But who in hell...?"

"You mean you have no idea?" Sturgis asked.

Mike Shayne gulped, then said, "Jesus, I was sure it would be there."

He picked up the phone and dialed Orla Rubens' private number, one she had given him for use in emergencies. He was greeted with an automatic an-

swering service that informed him in parrot tones Madame Rubens had been unexpectedly called away from Miami and would the caller please leave name and any message in the twenty-five seconds that followed the buzzer.

Shayne could think of a couple of beauts, but instead he hung up.

"Son of a bitch," he murmured as the brandy soothed his bruised ego. "I wonder if she took Nadja with her."

"I wonder if anyone is going to report the money as stolen—if, in fact, it ever existed."

"I'm beginning to wonder myself," said Shayne.

He received a check in the mail the next day from Hannes Logan for \$25,000.

A month later, he received a newspaper story from an English speaking newspaper in

Switzerland detailing the new foundation for children suffering from tuberculosis established by Mme. Lrla Rubens, the international cosmetics queen. Her lavishness, the article stated, was as unmatched as it was unexpected. The money given was totalled in Swiss francs, then in parentheses in dollars. It came to just \$375,000.

A picture showed near-naked children skiin on snowy slopes in the Alps. With them, he saw, was an instructress. While the coarseness of the newsphoto print made certain identification impossible, the instructress was tall and blonde and, beneath her sunglasses, looked remarkably like Nadja.

With story and picture was a brief note on a card bearing Orla Rubens' crest. On it was written, *Wish you were here—don't you?* It was signed O.R.

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## MIKE SHAYNE PRESENTS

Next Month's Headliners

**HOT ICE, COLD DEATH by BRETT HALLIDAY**

*The New Mike Shayne Complete Novelet*

**THE ONLY ROAD TO GLORY by C. G. COBB**

*A New Novelet*

# DÉJÀ VU

by  
**HELENE  
JUAREZ  
PHIPPS**



When Carmela got carsick on the bus, her trip to Mexico was ruined—but fate held a greater adventure for her on the way back

CARMELA STOOD BEFORE the iron gate that separated her from the garden of the hacienda and pulled vigorously at the bell cord. Her thigh-length braid brushed the hem of her mini-skirt, as she shifted the handle of the bucket of *tortillas* to her right arm.

When the red Cuernavaca sun pushed through the early morn-

ing clouds, the crushed glass scattered along the tops of the four surrounding walls, glistened like fragments of multi-colored crystal. Carmela tugged at the bell cord two more times before she heard the kitchen door open, then the cook's footsteps on the walk.

"You don't have to wake the whole house, Carmela," Delfina

said crossly, as she unbolted the lock with her key from the clanking chain around her ample waist.

"With the *Senor* Bergdorff and his *Senora* away, you are the whole house," Carmela said. "You don't have to be cross as the devil, just because it's so early. I brought us tortillas, still warm." The gate clanged shut behind them. Delfina put the padlock back in place.

"You were out before daylight?" Delfina eyed Carmela's short skirt with suspicion. "Why? What were you up to?" she asked as they cut across the expanse of lawn and walked towards the kitchen door.

"I was first in line at the *tortilleria*. That's the thanks I get. I couldn't sleep." Carmela said. Delfina took the cloth-wrapped tortillas from her and set the bucket on the stoop where the string mops were drying. "The center of town is crawling with police. There are uniforms and guns all over the *zocalo*."

"The police? With guns? What are they waiting for? Something must have happened?"

"They are looking for someone," Carmela said. "I have never seen so many bayonets."

"Bayonets? Who do the *perros* want to stick now?"

"*Sabe?*" Carmela said. "Who knows?"

"Whoever it is, they won't find him here. Our police never know where to look."

The kitchen was dark and cold and Delfina waited for Carmela to turn on the lights before she took the casserole of beans from the window sill and placed it over the gas burner.

"Aren't you ever going to learn to work the light switch?" Carmela asked. "Do you always have to wait for me? This is the third house we've worked in together."

Delfina rubbed her arm. "One can get a shock," she said. "One never knows with these inventions of the devil."

"It's not going to kill you to turn on a light."

Delfina looked at her with disbelief. Then, with a wax-stemmed match, she lit the fire beneath the beans. "What's worrying you, Carmela? Your eyes are two black coals burning in your head. What's keeping you awake these nights?"

Carmela was silent as she set two places on the blue-tiled table. Then, suddenly, she asked, "Tell me, Delfina, what does the devil look like?"

"The devil? He is good looking with dark curly hair and he wears a *sombrero* of Panama to cover his horns."

"No." Carmela said. "I don't

think so. He dresses like an *Indio*. He wears the white manta of the poor, so that he will not be recognized. I know. Because he came to me last night in a vision."

"You had better lock your door," Delfina said. "It was probably that devil José, the gardener."

"I would know José in the dark. This was not José. This was the devil, himself."

"A friend of José's then. That gardener must have been spreading the word around about you in bed. You had better start sleeping in the house instead of in the out-building by the toolshed."

"I like my room out there," Carmela said. "And it was the devil. But, at least, he didn't touch me."

Delfina opened the door of the American refrigerator and put the tortillas in their embroidered towel on the lower shelf. "Then, it was definitely not the devil." She closed the door carefully. "It was someone who came in from the fields and thought, because he saw the light on in your room, that you wanted company."

"There was no light," Carmela said, indignantly. "I never go to sleep with the light on. I woke up with the beams of the moon streaming in my window and the devil standing over

me breathing with his fiery breath."

"I still think it was José, probably full of *mescal*. That liquor would make his breath hot."

"I hate you," Carmela said. "I absolutely hate you."

"You'll get over that," Delfina said, "when I finish telling you what you are going to do tomorrow."

"And what am I going to do, tomorrow, that will make me stop hating you?"

"You are going to ride to the capital. You are going to take with you the *Señora's* overnight case that she left behind. You are to ride in the *turista* limousine with your purse full of pesos. You will be met at the station by Andriano, the *Señora's* driver in town, and he will take you to the apartment in Chapultepecq, where you will spend the night.

"Then, the following day, you will return with a box containing a ham that the *Señor* has bought, big enough for thirty people. And you will bring it home for me to cook. How does that sound?"

"To go to the city in the tourist limousine, to be met by Andriano in his black uniform and to be driven like a princess, a visitor of state, to spend a night in the capital!" Carmela threw her arms around Delfina.

"Oh, I love you. I love you very much. How did you manage all that for me?"

After finishing a mouthful of beans, Delfina shrugged. "I am too old for such a journey. Besides, there was no other way of getting the ham to me in time."

THAT NIGHT, lying on the mat in the little house near the toolshed, Carmela spent the slowly passing hours enjoying beforehand the drive up over the Cuernavaca hills in the great black tourist car, the first sight of Popo with its snow-covered crest, the capital with its fine cars and its cabs and the drive through the park with its fountains and its statues, then the ride in the elevator skyrocketing upward to the Señora's penthouse, the pots of orchids on the balconies, the happiness at seeing Andriano again, so elegant in his black suit, waiting to meet her as though she were the Señora's own daughter. She shivered with delight. It wasn't a dream. It wasn't a dream.

In the morning, she walked down to the Tetela gate and took the bus named *Encantado* to the tourist stop. On the square, two policemen were standing by the pushcart where paper flowers were being blown from their baskets by a vagrant breeze. The more robust

member of the *guardia* bent down and picked up a fallen poppy and twirled it enticingly at Carmela.

She tugged at her skirt, futilely, in an attempt to cover her knees, then headed for the ice cream vendor's yellow wagon, where she bought a mango cream. Then, in preparation for her hour's journey, a large glass of watermelon drink from the stall inside the waiting station, and a *torta*—a bun with meat, onions and chiles, with a very few onions, please, because she was going to be met by the Señora's driver, who might possibly want to kiss her.

Four steps up into the tourist limousine, then the black fumes billowing behind it as it stormed past the walls of the Villa Canarios, the swerve around the central plaza, the stop at the toll gate, and finally, Carmela was able to settle down to enjoy the seat by the window behind the man in the striped pants and the Panama hat.

The only other passenger was an Indian, in white shirt and trousers, his long black hair caught in a bullfighter's queue, who kept stealing glances at her as the limousine passed through the pine forests—*varoom*—pines, then more pines, their stringent wood-scent intermingled with the

taste of *torta* and the sweet-sugared smoke of *Delicados* wafting back from the seat in front of her.

At first the gradual rise and then, the road turned, winding steadily upwards, then curve after curve and no stopping for the clouds to pass. The swinging motion of the limousine and the churning of her stomach as she slid sideways on the leather seat lasted until the bus jolted to a stop at the way station. Holding her hand before her mouth to avoid soiling the expensive, cared-for upholstery, Carmela rushed out to the hard-packed dirt by the luggage platform.

The limousine had no plans to wait. The man with the Panama hat tripped quickly to the steps, calling urgently to Carmela. Then, after an ungraceful leap, he caught his balance on the ground, as the limousine sped on towards the capital without them.

To Carmela, he brought the overnight case that belonged to the *Señora*, and a look of concern on his dark face with the sharply-bridged aquiline nose.

"A beer, *Senorita*, will settle your insides," he said, gallantly, avoiding a look down at her feet.

Carmela took a deep breath and shelved her dismay at her own daring in talking to a

stranger who looked exactly like Delfina's devil. She couldn't wait for him to remove his hat.

The beer was warm and the foam on her tongue diverted Carmela's mind from her earlier embarrassment. The stranger said little, but held her hand and kept his head close to her face, encouraging her recovery as two members of the *guardia campesina* walked up to the bar of the *cantina*.

Three beers and two limousines later, Carmela remembered that Andriano had been waiting for her to descend from tourist limousine Number 9, at ten o'clock in Mexico City. She rushed from the *cantina* with her new friend at her side. By the time she had boarded the Number 12 limousine and had paid a second fare, she looked around her. The generous protective stranger had disappeared.

"Fourteen tourist cars have come and gone," Andriano said, when Carmela finally arrived. "I have been cooling my heels for three hours waiting for you. The *Senora* will be in a fury. The overnight case contains everything she puts on her face. And I don't believe a thing you say."

Carmela gave up trying to tell him it was impossible to squeeze fourteen tourist



limousines into the three hours that he had been waiting. She sat very still and counted the gold buttons on Andriano's black suit, buttons even on the pockets, front and back, and nervously anticipated her meeting with the *Señora*.

*Señora* Bergdorff in her chinchilla-trimmed velvet suit was in a fury. So, her mind filled with the party she had missed because of Carmela's tardiness, and planning for the next one she was to attend, she gave Andriano the job of executioner.

"Andriano will show you to your room and will lock the door after you. Tonight, Carmela, you stay in. I won't ask you what you have been doing, but I will not be responsible for you here. You come from the hills and you can't revert to your *ranchera* ways in the city."

"But you can't punish me like this. You can't make me a prisoner. It is only my second visit to the *capital*," Carmela's dark eyes overflowed with tears.

"Stop sniffing, Carmela. If you knew how to behave, I wouldn't have to do this to you." The *Señora* went to her room to fix her face with the myriad of creams and lotions that Carmela had brought her.

Carmela walked beside Andriano to the elevator, wordless with disappointment.

"The *Señora* has a hard character," Andriano said. "I warned you there would be trouble. She missed her lunch at the Embassy because of you. She doesn't forgive easily. In a way, she let you off mildly." He took a brass ring with many keys from inside his jacket.

"All night?" Carmela said. "I have to stay in all night, without getting even a smell of the city?"

"Not a smell." Andriano ushered her into her room, backed out quickly and emphatically turned the key in the lock.

From behind the closed door, Carmela stamped her foot. "It is you who have the hard character," she called out. "You enjoy doing this to me."

"I had other plans for us, Carmela," Andriano murmured through the keyhole. "If you had only been smarter. . . If you had only stayed on the limousine."

"If I had only made up a story," Carmela said to herself. She stepped out onto the balcony overlooking the park and tried to blank out the sound of her jailor's keys, as Andriano went on his way to enjoy the sounds and smells of the *capital*.

Someday, Carmela thought ruefully, as she snuggled beneath the eiderdown quilt of

the bed that had belonged to the Bergdorffs' daughter, someday, she would see the glass curtain rise at the *Bellas Artes*, and the solid glass dance floor with the lights beneath it at the pavilion in the park. She would learn to control her nervous stomach. Next time, she would not eat a *torta*, nor indulge in a watermelon drink. Next time, she would stay on the limousine and stay away from the devil.

IN THE MORNING, her pillow was only a little bit damp from her tears, when she heard Andriano's knock.

"Five minutes, Carmela. The limousine leaves at nine-thirteen. You don't want to miss this one."

Carmela tugged at her skirt and her braid and she was ready. She ate no breakfast before Andriano returned her to the tourist stop. Some workmen in the street were playing pranks with a ditch digger, swinging him from curb to curb, holding him by the hands and feet as though he were a small child.

"City people are as childish as country folks," Carmela said to Andriano, talking above the raucous laughter.

He accepted her observation without a smile. "What do you know of city folks?" he said.

"City people originally come from the country."

They could not be friends. Andriano had not forgiven her for her actions of the day before. She accepted her chastisement philosophically and ignored his arm, as he offered to help her up the steps of the limousine. He carried the heavy box with the ham and placed it on the seat beside her.

"See that you get this to Delina. Don't get off, this time."

Carmela saw no reason to answer. She placed herself by the window, watching through her long lashes to see what passenger would join her.

Two minutes before the limousine was to start, the Indian she had noticed the day before, in his white shirt and trousers, clambered aboard holding a clumsily wrapped object beneath his arm. He beamed at her as if he had found a long lost friend and sat on the seat beside her, placing his parcel next to hers.

With the safe separation of the boxed ham and a package tied with hemp, Carmela enjoyed the exchange of glances. Before the tourist car reached the top of the grade, she had learned his name was Manuel. He worked in the kitchen of the *posada*, the inn on the first block beyond the plaza in the town.

At the Cuernavaca station, Manuel offered to carry Carmela's ham. "It is very heavy for you," he said. "One more burden for me will be no bother."

"Thank you, it is very cumbersome," she said. Carmela handed him the box. Manuel placed it securely on his head, and his own bulky package on top. Carmela carried his *sombrero*. They let the bus go by and walked together through the town and up towards the Tetela gate. Carmela was smiling with delight.

"For so many years I have worked, and I have always been treated like a servant. Now, after a trip to the *capital*, I am treated like a lady." Her cheeks were burning and she could hear the rapid thumping of her heart. She was afraid that Manuel could hear it too.

Before they reached the entrance to the hacienda, Manuel asked, "Are you coming to the square, tonight?"

"I never go," Carmela said.

"How then, can you ever meet a *novio*? It is the only way."

"I am not ready for a *novio*," Carmela answered, "I don't need a steady boyfriend yet."

"You look ready enough to me," he said. "If you will meet me in the central square, I will take you home with me for *cena* ... for a little supper."

"And I suppose, I will have to cook it for you," Carmela said.

"You'd be surprised how well I can cook" he said. "I have learned at the restaurant."

"I will make an excuse to get out. I will tell Delfina not to expect me back until late."

At the gate to the hacienda, José, the gardener took the package from Manuel, then holding Carmela's arm, he walked her towards the house. Still light-headed from her travels and her encounter with Manuel, Carmela walked empty-handed into the kitchen and found two members of the *guardia campesina* sitting at the table.

Delfina was scraping the bottom of the earthen dish that had held *chiles rellenos*, having just shared her lunch of peppers stuffed with cheese and a pitcher of beer with the police officials.

With a respectful nod to the men in uniform, careful not to distract Delfina from the seriousness of the meeting, José placed the paper-wrapped bulk in Delfina's refrigerator and quietly backed out to his garden.

"Your adventures are over, Carmela," Delfina said, dismissing José with a frown. "These *Señores, oficiales*, members of the police want to talk to you."

One of the guards handed

Carmela a photograph. "Have you ever seen this man?"

Carmela's face lit up with a bright smile. "He is Delfina's devil. I met him on the way to the *capital*."

The police official drained his glass. "If you saw him again," he asked, "would you know him?"

"I would never forget him, never," Carmela said.

"Then you could help us identify him, if we find him?"

Carmela nodded.

"Don't leave town. We may need you."

"But I have no plans to leave... yet." Carmela's eyes began to sparkle. She watched the two men step outside and saunter off towards the side gate. "Tell me, Delfina, who was my friend from the *turista* limousine? Why are the police asking questions?"

Delfina pointed to the morning edition of the *Excelsior* that was spread out on the kitchen table. "There's the man you would never forget, never!"

On the front page, beneath black headlines was the same picture that the guard had shown Carmela, the same sharply, chiseled face, half-hidden by a Panama hat, but the newspaper carried a police artist's rendering, and beneath it a sketch of two figures seated at a *cantina* table. At the edge

of the-shorn border, freely pencilled in, appeared the handle of an overnight case and, above it, a single braid.

Carmela's eyes widened, as Delfina shoved the newspaper towards her. "They left out all but my braid," Carmela said. "They don't even say my name."

"It's a good thing," Delfina said. "What would the *Señora* say?"

Together they read as much of the news story that they could decipher, laboriously sounding out the words beneath the line drawing, skipping those that were unfamiliar. Carmela's heart began to pound again. A matter for the police! But she was almost in the paper. What would Andriano have to say to that?"

Delfina's stubby index finger made a path across the printed column. "It says here... the suspected murderer of the son of the governor of Sinoloa, after collecting 450,000 pesos ransom, dumped the boy's body in a nearby lake. The assassin was last seen with an accomplice, a young woman carrying an expensive (probably stolen) overnight case. Both suspects were seen at the Paradiso café, the last stop for the *turista* limousine en route to Mexico City. The two criminals escaped from the ever-

vigilant guards who instantly gave chase. . . .”

“It’s all a lie,” Carmela cried. “I didn’t steal the case. And the police—the *perros—ratones* never came near us. They walked right by us and went up to the bar.”

Delfina turned pale. “You were in the *cantina* with this murderer? Who knows how many he has killed? Did he steal the suitcase from you?”

“No. He brought it to me. I forgot and left it on the limousine.”

“You got off? You left the Señora’s case? Did you get off to go with this mad dog killer?”

“I got off the bus to throw up.” Carmela protested. She began to shudder. “He didn’t look so mean. He didn’t look vicious. He was—” she hid her face in her hands “—kind to me. He was so nice. I only thought he was the devil.”

“Now you know who he is,” Delfina said. “You’ll be lucky if the Señora doesn’t put you in jail for the scandal.”

“How will the Señora know? Unless you tell her. That could be anybody’s braid.” Carmela’s eyes flashed angrily.

“She can check your story with Andriano.”

“Andriano—what does he know? He met me, didn’t he? I had the Señora’s case with me. Everything was safe. And be-

sides, who ever believes anything Andriano has to say?”

“Nobody,” Delfina agreed. “Then for the time being, you are in no trouble. But where do you think you’re going now? Looking for another murderer to help escape?”

“No,” Carmela said. “I’m only going out for more *tortillas*.” She picked up the bucket from the kitchen steps where Delfina had left it the day before.

“We don’t need any. I’ve been here all alone.”

“I only like them fresh,” Carmela said. The door swung shut behind her.

A LIGHT RAIN WAS FALLING in the *zocalo*. All of Cuernavaca, it seemed to Carmela, had come down to cool off, and then the skies opened up. There was a rush for tables in the cafés at the edge of the plaza. Carmela ran, holding her braid beneath her shawl, to the restaurant where Manuel worked. After a brief wait, she was seated near the swinging door that opened to the kitchen.

From the waiter, she quickly ordered a *manzanillo*. She was looking forward to the effervescent apple drink. “One *manzanillo*?” His eyebrow lifted.

“Make it two,” Carmela said quickly. “I am expecting a friend.” The waiter turned on his heel and pushed open the

kitchen door. Through the opening, Carmela could see Manuel, with a towel over his arm, earnestly drying the platters the cook was handing him.

Two glasses of *manzanillo* were brought to the table. Carmela opened the purse, still filled with the *pesos* she had not been able to spend in the capital. "Wait!" she called the waiter back. "This has a fly... *una mosca*. Take it back and bring me another. And don't just flick out the fly."

As the waiter reluctantly removed the glass and backed into the swinging door again, Carmela saw Manuel inside, attacking a new pile of dishes. When as he looked out towards her, she waved. The door swung shut.

At the same time, she heard the sound of a chair scraping across the tiles. A dark-haired man with a two-day-old beard dragged his chair up close to hers. His sharply etched nose protruded above his unshaven chin.

"No... *no!* That seat is taken," Carmela cried. "But I know you..."

"Shut up," the intruder said. "I'll pay for the *limonada*." "Senorita, you come with me." From beneath the table he brought up a heavy pistol. As he leaned towards her, Carmela could feel it jabbing in her ribs.

She looked frantically towards the kitchen. The door appeared permanently closed.

With his gun at her side and his right arm supporting her, Carmela walked out with her captor and passed the open bar.

"Pretend that I am your *novio*," he said. He hugged her closely to him, emphasizing his overt affection with his gun. Carmela was breathing hard, her rounded breasts rising and falling beneath her blouse. She leaned against him, trying to keep her balance, as he hurried her past the bar out into the street, then around the corner. She felt the rough cobblestones beneath her feet as he rushed her down a narrow alleyway. Behind the restaurant, the rear door from the kitchen burst open.

"Carmela, you little..." She heard Manuel's soft-spoken Spanish spit out a crude street word, then a shout of "Look out!"

The warning came too late. She felt the soft explosion of something hard against the back of her head.

Anger and resentment boiled and simmered before she became fully conscious. She lay in her own darkness hugging the cobbles beneath her face. Manuel had no right to call her names. None of it was her fault. She endured the thudding

pain at the base of her skull. The odor of something sweet and spicy invaded her nostrils. She wondered where it was coming from.

She lifted one arm to brush it away and felt an object, warm and greasy, then saw a half-cooked ham resting on the cobles beside her. She rolled over and sat up.

Through the faint ripples of pain, she watched two members of the local police struggling to place handcuffs on the man who had so recently poked his gun at her side. And then, she felt Manuel's arms around her as he cried out his apologies. "I didn't mean to hit you," he said. "I was aiming at that fellow. If you hadn't clung so closely to him, I would never have thrown the ham. Forgive me, my little dove. José took the wrong package in error when I brought you home."

"You caught him, you *caught* him!" Carmela cried, instantly forgetting her pain. "You caught Delfina's devil."

"It was *they* who really caught him. They were following you." He pointed to the guards, who were walking off with their prisoner finally shackled. "They wouldn't have found him if you hadn't led them right to him."

Between sips of chocolate with cinnamon and bites of sweet tamale with raisins inside, Carmela finished telling Delfina her story. She proudly wore the light bandage that Manuel had placed tenderly around her head.

"My braid saved me from being completely killed," she said.

There was a tinkling from the outside bell. Carmela walked to the window and looked out. "They're here. Three carloads of them."

"And all I have to serve them is this one duck," Delfina went back to tugging frantically at the feathers.

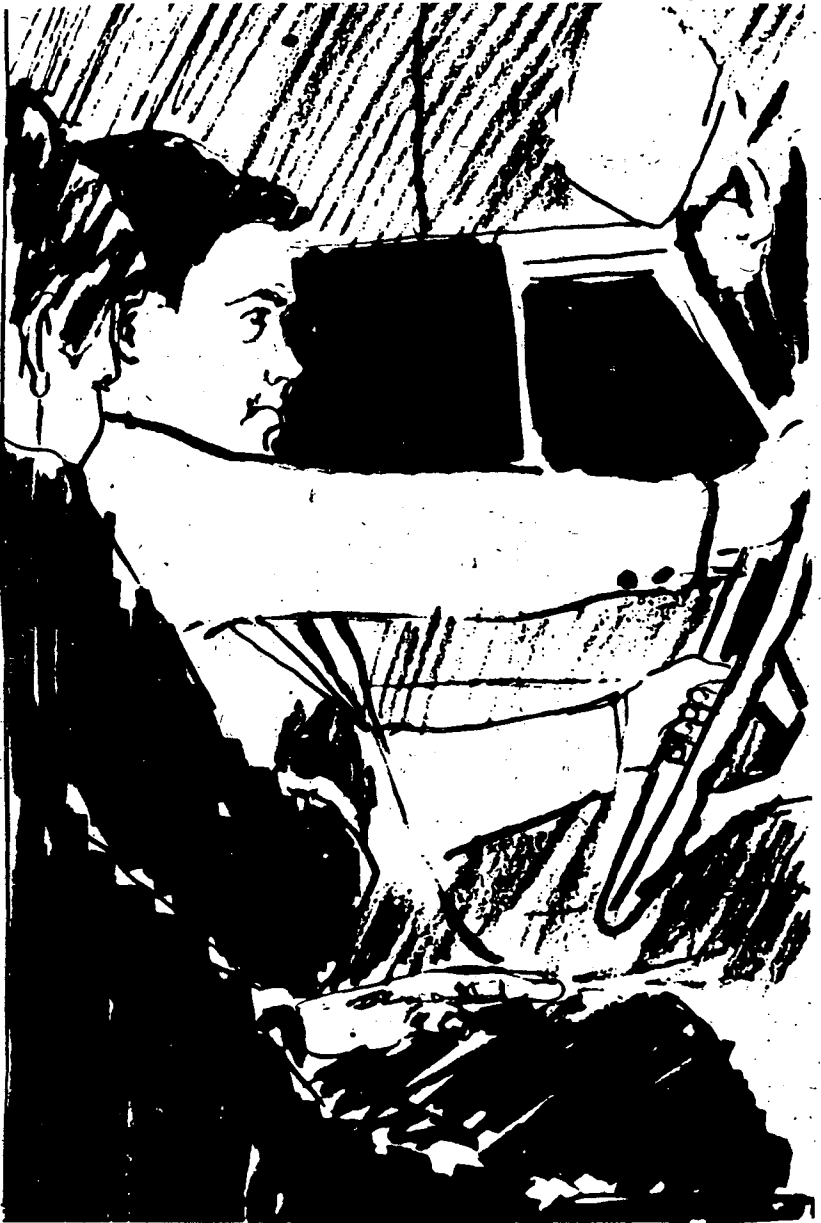
"You'll just have to get along without me," Carmela said. She picked up a bundle of clothes that she had tied up in a large square of cotton.

"You've packed your things. Where do you think you're going now?"

"To the devil," Carmela said. "I am going to marry him."

"What devil?" Delfina asked.

"My devil—Manuel. I told you he looked like an *Indio* and wore the *manta* of the poor. I recognized him immediately. And who else," Carmela said, "who but the devil himself could change a ham into a duck?"





A COMPLETE NEW SHORT NOVEL

# THE APOSTLE MURDERS

*When James Davenport's headless body was discovered, most of the tiny backwoods community said, "Good riddance!" But when the bodies of his fellow delinquents began to turn up, impaled, crucified, flayed, the sheriff found himself facing a reign of terror.*

by **CAROLE OTTOFY GRILLION**

RED LIGHTS WHIRLED atop the two police cars as they sped up the narrow winding highway which was surrounded on both sides by the forest that came within feet of the road. Their headlights beamed on a red pickup truck and a man in a cowboy hat waved his arm to them. The police cars eased onto the narrow country road. The sheriff and his deputy hur-

ried from the car. From the second car, two more deputies rushed to follow.

"Where is it?" the sheriff asked the man in the cowboy hat.

"It's up here." The man led the way along the rocky road. As they walked, the only sound was that of chat crunching under their feet—and a thousand locusts.

The man stopped walking and shook his head. "It makes me want to vomit." He pointed to the weeds at the side of the road. The sheriff and the deputies observed the headless body dressed in male clothing. At the collar, blood had soaked halfway down the shirt. The sheriff exhaled. "Have you seen the head?"

The man looked down at the cars and shook his head. "No, and I haven't looked."

The sheriff turned to his deputy. "Billy, radio for an ambulance." Billy went to the first car. The sheriff turned to another deputy. "Better get your camera, Possum." The deputy left.

The sheriff and the remaining deputy used their flashlights to search the weeds. "Here it is," the sheriff said. He stared at the head with its black hair; muttered, "He kinda looks like James Davenport."

The deputy stood silent.

The flashing of the camera's flashbulbs were popping behind them. "When you're through there," the sheriff called, "take a picture of this." The sheriff returned to the man who still stared down the road. "How'd you happen to notice it, R.A.?"

"I've been up this road a million times, Jesse. I know every boulder and fallen log. If one was gone, I'd notice it. That"—

his thumb motioned to the body—"thing's white shirt caught my eye. I backed up the truck to see what it was," and he shook his head again, "then I went on up to the house and called you."

The sheriff went to the body and stooped down gingerly to pluck the wallet from a back pocket. He beamed his light on the contents in the wallet. "Yep, it's James Davenport. Age eighteen."

A mile away, sitting in a rocking chair on his front porch, an elderly man watched the faraway lights of the police car as the revolving beam flashed above the many trees. Occasionally the police radio could be heard as it squawked and sputtered.

Finally, car doors slammed and the police car made its way up the narrow road, grinding the chat beneath its wheels. The car stopped and a spotlight flashed about the blackness, focussing on the old man, who rocked on the porch. The sheriff got out of the car and walked up to the spotlighted porch. "Evenin', Lucas."

"Evenin', Jesse. I've been watchin' your light down at McPherson's place. What's up?"

"We're just askin' questions. Did you hear anything tonight?"

"Like what?"

"Oh, a car, or a shout, or anything at all out of the ordinary."

"No." The man shook his head. "I've heard nothin' but that crazy-soundin' loon down at the river and a few hundred frogs. What's happened?"

"Well, somebody killed the Davenport boy and dumped his body a few miles down the road."

"Davenport? You mean that rowdy who never done a decent thing in his life? Wasn't he one of those boys that slashed all the faces of Nelson's horses when the horses were all in their stalls?"

"It was never actually proven, but, yeah, that's the one."

"And those boys—those devils have the nerve to use the name of good men, by calling themselves the Apostles. Ha! No, I didn't hear nothin'."

"Well thanks, Lucas. If you do learn anything, give me a call, would you?"

"Sure will, Jesse."

Jesse returned to the car.

"Did he hear anything?" Billy asked.

"Nope, and like the others, he's not too upset over the loss of the Davenport youth."

Before entering the town of Eminence, Missouri, a small bridge has to be crossed, and then the scenic highway is sud-



denly alive with filling stations and stores. But all were closed. The only places open were a courthouse, where two prisoners sat out front with the jailer—a hamburger stand—two motels—the police station—and a tavern. The police car pulled up before Earl's Tavern and the juke box could be heard blaring, and laughter came from the place.

Jesse and Billy walked to the door. Both young men were in their twenties, were tall and lean. Jesse had dark brown hair, and Billy's sandy hair was in a crew cut.

They opened the screen door and surveyed the patrons. In a dark booth, two women in their forties sat talking to a man. On the floor, one couple danced

while another couple did more kissing than dancing. At the bar, three girls sat talking and laughing.

"Howdy, Jesse," the bartender said.

"Evenin', Earl." The two officers went to the bar and ordered beer.

Earl brought them, picked up the change from the bar and leaned on his elbow. "I hear you've had a busy night."

"Yep. Hear anything else?"

"No. Some folks are surprised to hear of the circumstances of the murder and, as you can see, there's not a dry eye in the place."

Jesse looked around. "Earl, when are you going to get a license for dancing?"

"When somebody tells me I have to."

Jesse grinned and took a drink from his glass. His dark eyes observed the girls again. The pretty blonde had long straight shiny hair, a round face with large eyes—also a subtle smile as she wiggled her fingers in greeting.

Jesse took his drink with him as he walked down to the girls and stood alongside the blonde. "What're you doin' down here, Cicely?"

"Jesse," she said softly, "I can take so much of sittin' in that house in the middle of the woods, doing nothing, and

knowing nothing's going to happen. I'm too young to be buried," She smiled. "I'm *of age* now, Jesse. I can even drink if I want to."

Jesse set his glass on the bar. "Let's dance."

"Sure." Cicely slid from her stool.

The song on the jukebox was *Downtown*. "See," Cicely said, "even the song says it—when you get lonely, and there's nothing to do, you can always go . . . downtown." She smiled brightly.

"How old are you now?" he asked.

"I'm nineteen, I'm drinking soda, my father knows I'm here."

"It was your father who called me earlier to report James Davenport's body."

Cicely nodded. "So I heard." She studied Jesse's strong face, his dark eyes, the thin lips that smiled down at her. He pulled her close so she couldn't stare at him.

The song ended and, with his arm about her, he led her to the jukebox. He put in a quarter. "What do you like?"

Without hesitation she pushed down three numbers and said, "I like *Rainy Night in Georgia*, *Waylon Jennings*, and I'd like *Downtown* again."

"You sure go for the blues." They walked to the bar. Billy

and the two girls were laughing and talking, and they turned when Jesse and Cicely came up to them.

"I hate to run off," Jesse said, "but we're still on duty and have to relieve the eleven o'clock shift. Could we take you home?"

Cicely shook her head and motioned to her friend with the long straight brown hair. "Laura Lee's takin' me home."

Jesse nodded and was serious when he said to them, "You girls be careful out there. Lock your doors and—be careful."

## II

DURING THE WEEK, James Davenport was buried and five of his teenage friends were his pallbearers. The sixth was an uncle.

That night, the police lights again flashed in the night as they sped down the wood-edged highway in the Ozarks. Again they pulled onto the same country road but this time no one waited to guide them. They drove slowly up the road, the crunching chat breaking the silence of the night. The first car focused its spotlight to the right, and the second car kept its light to the left.

"*There!*" Jesse stopped the car and kept his light beamed on a tall pole. He brought the

light down the pole to see that it was stuck into a body on the ground.

The second car saw it, then began searching among the trees with its light.

Jesse and Billy left their car and both unsnapped the flap on their revolvers as they walked cautiously to the body, then stood looking at it.

"Another youth," Billy observed.

The top of the victim's head was smashed and a bloody rock lay nearby. Sticking up from the chest of the corpse was a long homemade spear.

The two deputies came up behind them. "Who's it this time?"

"Thomas Hayden," Jesse answered.

One of the deputies began taking pictures. Jesse turned to Billy, said, "Call for an ambulance."

The ambulance arrived and the driver and his aide brought the stretcher to the corpse. "Evenin', Jesse," the driver said, then looked at his pick-up. "Say, cain't you call us to take somebody to the hospital, instead of all these messy ones?"

Jesse shook his head. "I'd like to oblige you."

"What about that thing stickin' out of him?"

Jesse took his handkerchief—

from his pocket. "I don't want to smudge any fingerprints, but I have a feeling it's been wiped clean anyway."

He stooped down and tried to loosen it with one hand but it wouldn't budge. He had to use two hands to pull it up. He walked to the police car and carefully angled it in the back seat. The driver and the aide were carrying the covered body to the ambulance on a stretcher.

The two deputies stood by Jesse's car. "Ezra," Jesse said, "you stay here and keep the area clear of anything walking around in here." Jesse motioned toward the ambulance. "And, Possum, when you get to the funeral parlor, tell old Heinecke to do a chemical and send me a report . . . tonight. I'd like to know if there's any poison or drug in him."

Jesse and Billy got in the car. "We'll see you all later," Jesse said from the window. "We're going to talk to the neighbors." Jesse started to pull away, then stopped again. "Possum, while you're in town, try to find the other four boys that run—that ran—with Tommy. I want to talk to them."

"Will do." Possum nodded.

Jesse and Billy drove slowly up the road, using their spotlight to search the wooded surroundings. Twice, the winding

road crossed the wide creek. They drove through it very slowly, and their headlights shone down on the swimming tadpoles and minnows.

Again on the road, they had to come to a complete stop while they surveyed the huge boulder protruding from the surface. Only a stick of dynamite could level it.

After maneuvering carefully around the rock, they drove out of the woods and onto a clearing where an old Civil War mansion loomed grandly. It was a wooden two-story building with tall pillars that soared from the long front verandah, up to the long porch of the second floor. They drove up the circled driveway, then went up to the screen door and knocked. The man who appeared on the other side of the screen door was the man who had called them on the first murder.

"Evenin', R.A.," Jesse said. "Mind if we come on in for a talk?"

"Not at all." R.A. opened the door wide, then motioned toward the living room, where his wife watched television and his seventeen year old son sat in an overstuffed chair, pretending sleep.

"Hello, Oleander," Jesse said to the prim woman in her print dress. He took off his hat to reveal a headful of dark

healthy hair. Billy stood silent beside him.

"What's the trouble?" R.A. asked, the whites of his eyes prominent in his ruddy face.

"We're investigating the murder down the road—a new one. The informant had a young voice." Jesse looked toward the big-boned seventeen-year-old in the chair. "I was wonderin' if maybe it was Johnny."

R.A. and Oleander looked at their son. Johnny opened blue eyes, glanced at all the faces, then shook his head.

"What's this about another murder?" R.A. asked. "Who's it this time?"

"Young Thomas Hayden. You know him?"

"Yeah." R.A. again looked at his son. "Isn't he the one that used to call Cicely a lot?"

Johnny nodded.

R.A. looked back to Jesse. "Or maybe I should say he used to pester her a lot."

"Oh?" Jesse looked around. "Where is Cicely?"

"She's in town. Laura Lee picked her up about six."

"Cicely was in town on the night of the first murder, too."

"Yes, but . . ." R.A. shrugged.

Jesse looked back at Oleander. "Have you all been here tonight?"

"Yes," Oleander replied meekly. "R.A. and I have been



watching T.V. since dinner, and Johnny's been upstairs doing his homework."

"Oh?" Jesse studied the big brown-haired Johnny. "Could I see what you've done?"

Oleander rose to her feet. "Really, Jesse!" she sputtered "Surely you don't think one of us . . ."

"Almost everyone hated those boys, and most people have very good reasons for hating. We have to start somewhere." Jesse looked back to the youth. "Well, Johnny?"

The room was quiet.

R.A. exhaled. "Go get the homework, Johnny."

Johnny looked from his father to Jesse, then shook his head. "I didn't do it. I fell asleep."

"Would you want to see his rumpled bed?" Oleander asked in a quaking voice.

Jesse said, "No." He and Billy turned to the door with R.A. following. Jesse opened the screen. "We're going to talk

to the rest of the folks on this road."

The men went out on the porch and R.A. still followed.

"How's your garden doin'?" Jesse asked.

"You know how my garden's doin'." R.A. shrugged. "The same as anyone's garden. All we grow is rocks. We dig out all the rocks from the garden and the next year it's full of rocks again. The rocks come up fine." R.A. touched Jesse's arm and was serious. "This new murder—was it like the other one?"

"Not really. This one was all in one piece."

"Oh."

"Keep your house locked up, R.A.. There's a maniac loose and he seems to like this part of the county. And if you've got a gun, keep it handy, but don't get trigger-happy. Guard Johnny. The murderer seems to like young boys."

R.A. grimaced. "C'mon, Jesse, do you know you're scaring me?"

Jesse looked out at the yard. "Johnny and his dog were inseparable, but I don't see her anywheres around."

R.A. looked at the door, then whispered, "He hasn't been the same since Missey died. He just sits and stares."

"What happened to her?"

"Johnny says it was just old

age. He found her in the woods."

"Old age?" Jesse echoed. "That dog was only eight or nine, wasn't she?"

R.A. shrugged. "We're not sure."

"Well," Jesse started down the steps, then paused. "R.A."—he hesitated—"it's none of my business but—isn't it dangerous for Cicely to be running around at this time?"

"I know it, but she's nineteen. I can't make her stay home. If I tried, she'd just move into town and live with that Laura Lee. They've been thick as thieves since they started working together. I hate it, but ... I'd rather see her a little bit, than not at all."

### III

JESSE AND BILLY parked at the small four-room ground-level police station. As they entered the brightly-lit office, they hung their hats on the coat rack. Possum entered. "I've got the boys. They were up on the flat roof, drinking whiskey and being loud. Do you want to see them separately or all together?"

"I'll see them all together." Jesse followed Possum into a larger room, where a long table and six straight chairs were the only furnishings. Jesse nodded



at the four youths, then sat on the edge of the table and surveyed their four stony faces. They all wore jeans and T-shirts. Two sat with their arms crossed, one leaned on the table with his elbow, the one at the end was slouched as low as he could get in the straight chair, his head leaning on the back.

"You know why you're here?" Jesse asked.

"There's no tellin'," a straight-haired, homely blond answered. The other three snickered.

Jesse sighed. "Another of your buddies, Tommy Hayden, was murdered tonight."

The group flinched, then became attentive.

"Someone smashed Tommy's head with a rock and then punched a five-foot pointed pole into him."

The boys sat staring with open mouths.

"Well," a black-haired boy said to Jess. "Who did it?"

"We don't know yet, Bart. I was hoping that maybe one of you could tell me."

The black-haired, black-eyed youth stared. "How would we know! That's *your* job!"

"Any of you have a quarrel with Tommy?"

"No," they all answered.

"Has he had any trouble lately, with anyone?"

"No," they said, again as one.

"Well, somebody hated him and James pretty bad."

The youths shrugged and looked at each other.

"How about some girl trouble . . . that a father or someone would avenge."

"Not that I know of," blond Sy said. His eyes were too close together and his nose was heavily pitted with blackheads.

"He would've told us if anything happened lately." Sy inserted his finger into the large tear in the knee of his jeans.

"Did any of you see him tonight?" Jesse asked.

The youths looked at one another. "I saw him last night," Sy said.

"Me, too," black-haired Bart said.

Jesse looked to the two silent boys, then said, "What about you two?"

Michael, the brown curly-haired youth on his elbow, sat up. "We were all five together last night."

"And no one saw Tommy today?" Jesse asked.

The four shook their heads.

"When you didn't see him tonight, didn't you wonder where he was?"

"Yeah," Sy answered, "but we figured he'd show up, sooner or later."

"And nobody went to his

house or called him?" Jesse asked.

The boys snickered. Bart explained, "He's never to home. He sleeps out in the fields all summer."

"Or the woods?" Jesse surveyed the foursome. "Somebody out there"—he motioned toward the windows—"doesn't like you."

"Listen," Bart said. "I don't care what's done around here, we get blamed for it."

"That's right," Sy agreed. "Everybody accuses us of everything. If somebody's flower pot falls off the porch"—his thumb jabbed his chest—"it's us they blame. If they've got a hundred-year-old fence that falls over one day, they say we did it."

"Right," Bart said. "The folks around here really pick on us."

Jesse stared at Bart.

"Okay if I smoke?" Michael took his elbow off the table to light a cigarette.

Jesse said to them, "Now you guys better wake up. Either you're cleaning out among yourselves, or somebody in town is cleaning up on all of you. If you've got any ideas or suspicions, you better tell me."

"If we figure out who—it is,"—the homely Sy sounded tough—"we'll take care of them."

"Oh—no—you—... won't!"

Jesse said it slowly. "If it took a million years, you still couldn't figure-out who hates you the most. Do you know how many people in town despise the guts of every one of you!"

The boys sat silent.

"Within the last few weeks, who have you hurt?"

"Wow!" Sy said, sarcastic.

"All right," Jesse said, "within the last week or so, what's happened?"

The four sat quiet.

"This is no time to be modest."

The curly-haired youth with the cigarette, tried to conceal a smirk.

Jesse stared at him. "You just thought of something, Michael. What is it?"

"Nothing." Michael looked down at the ash on his cigarette, then flipped the ash to the floor.

Jesse looked to the talkative Sy. "What happened? You better give me some leads."

"We had a lot of fun spying at the Elton Club last week," he said.

"That's the nudist camp up on Highway Nineteen," Bart said.

Jesse looked back to Sy.

"They were all out there playing volleyball one night. The women's tits were bouncin' and the men's weinies were floppin'. It was funnier 'n hell.

Anyway, we just had a lot of fun hollering at them. *Oh!* Were they *mad!*" Sy grinned. "They began chasin' us and one of the men caught Bart and hit him a few times."

Jesse looked toward the end of the table where the silent Phil still slouched. Jesse turned back to Sy. "And then you did what?"

Sy smirked and scratched his blond stringy head. "Aw, we took care of all their cars—but none of them knew who we were, so how could they get even with us?"

Jesse glanced back to Billy and Possum, who stood listening with their arms crossed. He turned back to Sy. "Lately, have you raped any of the girls in town, or on the outskirts?"

Bart was smug. "As long as Bicky Lou and her sister are around, we're the ones who get raped." The boys chuckled.

Jesse nodded. "So we have exactly nothing, except the fact that your friend, James, had his head sliced off, and Tommy got himself speared. Get scared, boys, 'cause one of *you* might be next."

The room was silent and Michael, with the cigarette, dropped it on the table, then picked it up and snuffed it out in the ashtray.

Jesse rose from the table. "That's all for tonight, boys. I'll



be wantin' to talk to you again. Keep your noses clean and be careful."

The youth rose and filed out. Jesse looked at his wristwatch, then said to Billy and Possum, "Well, I guess we'll have to go through their files and start making a list of all the people who have made complaints against them. We've got to start somewhere."

"What about all the complaints that weren't filed?"

"We'll have to make a list of them, too."

## IV

AT 12:15 JESSE LEFT the station and stood out in the sultry night. All the nocturnal creatures were conversing loudly, filling the darkness with a peaceful serenade. Jesse got in his car and headed for home. He passed Earl's Tavern and heard the song *Downtown*, made a U-turn and went back, parking in front.

The tavern had more than twenty customers, usual for a Friday night. Jesse stood by a gray-haired man at the bar. "Evenin', Felix."

The man smiled. "How ya doin', Jesse."

"Doin' fine." Jesse looked around at the patrons.

"Any truth to the rumor that you're thinkin' of becomin' a family man?"

Jesse laughed. "C'mon Felix. I've never even kissed a girl yet, and already you're talkin' family."

Felix smiled.

Earl, in a short-sleeved white shirt, brought Jesse a glass of beer. "What's new on the murders?"

"Not much. We're investigating." Jesse paid for the glass and leaned toward Earl to ask, "Cicely Wells been in tonight?"

"No," Earl said and shook his balding head. Though his hair was combed across the top of his head, the skin still shone through.

"Earl!" someone called, and Earl went up the bar.

"Cicely Wells?" Felix said. "You'll probably find her popping her bubble-gum and sittin' on the wall down by the store."

Jesse shook his head. "She's left the wall. Big girl now... she smokes cigarettes and rides around in cars. Here, Felix, I'll trade you." Jesse took Felix's glass and replaced it with his full one. "Be seein' you."

Jesse left the tavern and cruised slowly down the main street. He saw Laura Lee's car parked at the hamburger stand and parked next to it.

Cicely looked from her opened window. "Hi, Jesse," she said softly.

He nodded and turned off his lights.

Laura Lee leaned her dark head forward and waved.

Again he nodded.

"What's new on the murder of James Davenport?" Cicely asked.

"Nothin'."

The silence was awkward. Cicely looked to Laura Lee and grinned. "Say somethin'."

"I can't think of nothin'."

Cicely sipped from her malt

cup but it was empty, so she handed it to Laura Lee, then looked toward Jesse. "You have a spotlight on your car?" and she grinned. "Of course you do. I'm looking right at it."

"Spotlight, two-way radio, gun rack . . . just as fancy as a police car." He smiled. "I'd like to talk to you, Cicely. Could I take you home?"

She stared at him, then turned to Laura Lee and they whispered. Laura Lee turned on her headlights.

Cicely turned to Jesse. "As soon as we pay our check. I don't want to leave her sitting here by herself."

The car hop came and took their tray. Laura Lee started the engine and Cicely got out. "See you tomorrow." Laura Lee backed up.

Cicely walked around to get in Jesse's car and they, too, left. As they drove up the highway Jesse asked, "Where have you and Laura Lee been?"

"We went to a movie in Salem. Is that what you wanted to talk to me about?"

"No. I was wondering what you were doing next Saturday."

"Nothin'."

"Would you want to go watch the tractor pull? Then in the evening we can go to the jam-boree at Earl's."

She smiled. "Sure. Oh, Laura Lee mentioned it and . . ."

"Billy can take her," he said.

"Fine. I'll tell her." Cicely noticed all the traffic. "There sure are a lot of cars out tonight."

"Yes," Jesse turned onto Cicely's rocky road. There were two cars parked further up and a third was slowly coming down the road. From one of the cars, a spotlight lit up the wooded area.

"I wonder what's going on?" Cicely leaned forward.

"I imagine they're all looking at the scene of the crime. We had us another murder here tonight."

Cicely gasped. "Is that so? Who?"

"Thomas Hayden. Did you know him?"

"Sure."

"He used to call you a lot?"

She looked at him. "Well, yes, but I never went out with him. I didn't like his friends, or their language, or anything about that crowd." Cicely looked back at the lighted area. "Whereabouts did it happen?"

"Right here." Jesse stopped the car, opened his door and got out, leaving one leg in the car as he talked across the roof. "Been busy, Ezra?"

"It's been like this all night. I sure hope we find us some footprints here tomorrow."

"Hope so," Jesse got back in his car. As they passed the car

with the spotlight, Cicely saw that it was an empty police car.

"Was it...like the other one?" Cicely asked.

"Not quite. He was all together."

"Oh!" She lit a cigarette.

"Why don't you quit smoking, Cicely, before you really get hooked on them."

She glanced at him but said nothing.

"Cigarettes—they smell up everything—your hair, your clothes—and they stain your teeth."

Her expression was cool and unfriendly as she stared at him. "You used to smoke."

He nodded. "But, I've seen the light." He grinned.

"Well I haven't seen it yet," she said huffily. They rode in silence, with just the crunching of the chat for sound. A large opossum lumbered across the road but neither commented on it.

Jesse reached the clearing and she threw out her cigarette as they drove up the circled driveway, stopping at the verandah. "I'll call you before Saturday and we'll make a time," he said.

She sat stiff. "I'd sure hate to stink up your upholstery." She glanced up at the ceiling. "I don't want to go anywhere my smoking is restricted. If I'm not comfortable..." She shrugged.

"Well, I simply don't care to go anywhere I can't smoke. I wouldn't have myself very much fun."

"I didn't say you couldn't smoke. I just said, 'why don't you quit smoking before you get hooked'."

"There's nothing worse than a reformed reformer."

"I didn't realize it was such a sore spot with you, or I never would've mentioned it." He stared at her, then drummed his fingers on the steering wheel.

She got out and slammed the door.

## V

IN THE MORNING, Jesse walked into the grocery store and leaned on the counter, smiling at the large lady who came up to him. "Mornin', Evie," Jesse said.

"Mornin', Jesse, and what can I do for you?"

He pointed to her large pane of window glass that fronted the store. "I understand that it was that one bunch of boys that broke that window...and not street vibrations, like you originally said."

She nodded. "Yep, it was them, and in broad daylight too."

"Did anyone see them do it?"

"We all did!" she said

adamantly. "They don't hide from anybody, and the glass cut Mrs. Davies leg, but she was afraid to prosecute them!"

Jesse nodded. "Do you think Mr. Davies would take the law into his own hands and square things with them? To get even?"

Evie stared, then shook her head. "He's more meek than she is! And they certainly wouldn't go around murderin' anyone 'cause of it."

Jesse shook his head and straightened from his leaning. "That's right comforting to know," and Jesse took off his hat, used his fingers to comb his hair back, and stuck the hat back on. "Well," and he walked toward the door, "It's gonna be another hot one today."

Evie fanned her dress away from her chest. "I reckon."

Jesse paused at the door. "By the way, Evie, did you have insurance on the window? Or have to pay for it yourself?"

"Insurance covered it."

On the opposite side of the street, Billy stood by the soda machine outside the filling station. The owner came out as Billy was opening his bottle of soda.

"Well, Billy, this is kinda early for you, ain't it?"

"It sure is," Billy said and took a drink. "It's like the middle of the night to me," and

they both chuckled. "We're checking on all the vandalism that's been done. You've been hit a few times I understand."

"Yep. Last week they took all the tires that were stacked out by the side, and rolled them all down the hill and into the river. Sweet, aren't they?"

"Who is 'they'?"

The owner stuck his tongue in his cheek. "C'mon now, Billy, we all know who 'they' is. That group of lousy scum they call boys."

"Anyone see them do it?"

"Yep. Two cars drove by while 'they' were laughin' and sendin' the tires down the hill. Both cars told me about it, the next day."

"Did the cars actually name the boys?"

"They named all six of them."

Billy nodded.

"On other occasions, they've broken my pumps, and my wife made a little flower garden there by the front, with painted rocks all around it. 'They' trounced down the flowers and threw the rocks all over."

Billy took a drink.

"I got witnesses on that one too. Say, how you doin' on the murders?"

"Not too good."

Jesse walked down the gravel road to the boat dock. "Takin' your boat out, Jesse?"

Jesse turned around to see an

elderly man in overalls, who carried a bait box and threw it into a row boat.

"No," and Jesse smiled. "It'd sure be a good day for it though."

"You workin' days now?" the man asked.

"No, workin' two shifts till these murders are solved. Those boys sure did cause a lot of trouble, and it seems nobody ever reports them."

"Nope, it wouldn't be worth it. We can't prove nothin'. It's our word against theirs. You know how it is with juveniles . . . they can practically get away with murder. If you're seventeen and commit a crime, it's okay. If you turn eighteen the next week and do the same crime, they throw the key away on you."

Jesse stared down into the water of Jack's Fork River, which was so clear that he could easily watch the fish. "Was yours one of the boats damaged, not too long ago?"

"Yep, they busted out the bottoms of almost fifteen boats that night. There was no witnesses, but folks recognized their loud hollerin' and laughin' while they were doin' it. You were one of the lucky ones . . . you and six other boats were still floatin'. Either their feet got tired of stompin' out the bottoms, or, they left alone

the boats belongin' to people with vicious tempers or them that carries a gun."

Jesse looked across the water. "What's that over there? Looks like a big wooden cross."

"I was noticin' that myself, earlier. I never saw it till this mornin'. Electric pole, I guess."

"In regards to the murders," Jesse said, 'we're lookin' for a motive. Would you believe that nearly everybody in this town has a motive?"

"I'd believe it," and the old man untied the rope that held his boat to the dock, and stepped down into it. "Check at the Young place. There's a real motive for you."

Jesse nodded. "I'm plannin' to."

Billy stood at the doorway of the Real Estate office, listening to a well-dressed, cleanly shaven man in his thirties, who said, "and after they stole my car, they totalled it. My insurance went sky high."

"What in the hell does everybody think the police are for?" Billy retorted. "We're here to help people! Last week, this was a peaceful town . . . today we learn it was never peaceful!"

The man shrugged. "Old Mrs. Mills complained that they threw a rock at her window . . . then her house burned down."

Jesse drank a glass of water



at the drug store as he listened to the manager, "they stole me blind every time they walked in here: magazines, candy, sun glasses, anything loose on the counters. They even stole a tube of lipstick! Now that's stealin' just to be stealin'."

Jesse set his glass on the counter and started to walk away, then back-stepped and looked into the glass case. "What's that, Del?"

"This?" and the manager opened the glass case and pulled out a mirrored cigarette case. "It's nice and flat and looks like a compact. Fancy, isn't it."

"It sure is," and Jesse pressed the lever and it opened to show a shiny interior. "What are you askin' for it?"

"At Christmas I was askin' twenty dollars, but now it's down to eight ninety-eight."

Jesse reached into his pocket for his wallet.

## VI

THE POLICE CAR DROVE slowly down the wooded country road and turned off into a dirt road, then passed a rickety fence before the paintless house came into view. The wooden house was as dilapidated as the fence, and both looked like they would fall over at any moment.

Jesse and Billy climbed out of



the police car and silently walked to the house. Small lizards darted excitedly on the siding of the house. The door was open and there was no screen door on it. They looked in.

"What do you want there!" a faraway voice said from behind them. They stepped off the porch and walked down to a man and three dogs coming up to meet them. The man wore a large dirty brown hat to keep the ticks off his head, a pair of bib-overalls, and he loosely carried a shotgun atop his shoulder. The three dogs were curs: a part beagle; a part-collie; and a brown and white dog.

"Hello, Mr. Young," Jesse said. "We're talkin' to folks about the two murders. Seems that most everybody is glad they're gone."

"And I ain't no different. You think I might've murdered them?" and he snorted. "No, but don't think I haven't thought of it more'n once," and Mr. Young glared at them. "And 'no', I've got no alibi. I was to home."

Jesse and Billy nodded solemnly.

"How's Mrs. Young and Sissy doin'?" Jesse asked.

"Doin' fine. They're out blackberry pickin'."

"M-mm, that sounds good. Makes my mouth water just thinkin' of it."

"Yeah," Mr. Young said sternly. "You want a glass of blackberry wine before you go?"

"Sure would," Jesse and Billy said together, and they followed Mr. Young to the house. Jesse and Billy both sat on the porch, with one leg on the ground, silently watching the harmless lizards darting. Mr. Young came out of the house without his shotgun, but with a bottle of homemade wine, and three chipped cups. He poured into each cup, then sat on a chair on the porch and they all drank silently.

"M-mm," Jesse said. "That's absolutely delicious."

"Sure is," Billy said.

They all sat silent again.

"Yep," Mr. Young said, "I'm glad they're dead. I only wish it was all six of them." And he

sipped again and was silent. "No, I take that back. Simon... well, he only acted like he took a turn usin' Sissy, but he only acted, so she told me."

"Sy?" and Jesse was surprised. "That big-mouth ugly kid didn't touch her?"

"He touched her, but he didn't go all-the-way. He only acted like it... for his friends."

Mr. Young exhaled sadly. "Those dirty bastards. I don't know which made me the sick-est... knowin' what they all did, or beatin' her the way they did."

"You know, Mr. Young," Jesse said, "the State can prosecute them without your approval."

"Not if we deny it."

Jesse shrugged and set his cup on the porch. "Well, thanks again for the wine. I was surely draggin' till we got here," and Jesse stood and Billy did the same. "Take it easy now."

Mr. Young nodded. "And I hope you don't get whoever's doin' it, till he's finished gettin' them all."

Jesse and Billy walked to the car and got in, and both waved before they pulled away.

As they drove slowly, Jesse said, "that's a bad scene there."

"Sure is. Hey, look, isn't that them?"

Walking up the road was a tired-looking woman in a faded

blue cotton dress, and beside her was a young girl of fourteen, who also wore a wrinkled cotton dress which was too long for her young years. Her blonde hair was braided and she pushed back her glasses to watch the police car approach:

Jesse and Billy smiled and waved to them as they drove past.

In town, Jesse walked up to the white picket fence, opened the gate and walked up to the fully-screened porch. The door of the house was open so he knocked on the screen door and waited. It was a small, clean, three-room house without a basement.

Laura Lee came through the doorway in a pink summer dress. "Well," and she smiled. "I just got home from work," and she held the screen door open for him.

"No, I cain't stay. I've got to get back up to the station."

"I guess you've been busy, what with the murders."

"You could say that," and as he nodded his head, he extended a small paper bag to her. "Here, give this to Cicely."

"To Cicely?" and Laura Lee looked at the drugstore bag. "Okay, any message?"

"Nope," and Jesse turned and left.

The clock on the wall said ten o'clock. Jesse looked out the

dark window and stacked the papers on his desk. He looked at the desk beside him and shook his head. "Billy, I've written all the reports I'm able to write."

"I could write all night," and Billy raised his hand like a claw. "My hand's paralyzed."

Jesse grinned. "Let's knock off early. I've had it," and he stretched his shoulders back, and groaned. "Oh. As of now, Ezra and Possum are officially on duty."

"Oh-hh," Billy moaned when he leaned back in his chair. "I cain't move."

"Let's walk down to Earl's."

"Walk?"

Cicely sat at the bar with the gray-haired Felix. "Oh, come on now, Felix," she said and laughed.

"I'm serious! He—Sweet Sixteen-plus, and never been kissed."

Cicely giggled. "I don't believe it."

"It's the truth, so help me," and he slapped the bar for emphasis. "I learned this straight from the horses's mouth."

"I can see you're serious!" and she stared at Felix. "But I cain't believe it." Cicely saw Jesse and Billy come in. "Well, speak of the devil—here comes Jesse James and Billy the Kid now."

Felix glanced at the door. Jesse and Billy came down the bar, greeting most of the patrons. "Hiya Felix," Jesse said and rested a hand on Felix's shoulder. Jesse looked over to Cicely and left Felix to stand by her. "And how's this fair rose? Sweet or thorny?"

Cicely smiled. "Sweet," and her hand covered the cigarette case that sat on the bar. "Thanks, Jesse, I love it," and her face blushed.

"Peace treaty," and he smiled. "Let's dance."

She slid from the stool. "Have you got a gas mask to wear so you won't have to smell my hair?"

"I'll hold my breath," and they went out onto the dance floor where two other couples danced in the dim light. She looked up and grinned.

He smiled.

The dance was nearly over when she looked up at him again and grinned, then chuckled.

"What's funny?"

"Nothing," and she grinned broader.

The song on the jukebox was nearly over and she stopped dancing, and put both arms around his neck, then reached up to kiss him sweetly. Her kiss fanned a spark and he came alive, returning the kiss emotionally. When he released

her, Cicely felt weak and boneless. "That was no first kiss!" she finally said.

"Who? You or me?"

"Felix told me you've never kissed a girl!"

Jesse laughed and embraced her and rocked her. He looked down to say, "You're kiddin' me, Cicely. Did you forget that I dated Laura Lee a few times?"

"No—well, yes I did, 'cause she never said anything about it," and Cicely shrugged.

"Honey," and he grinned, "what we did—you don't discuss with nice people."

"Oh?" and she glared at him.

He laughed and embraced her again, then leaned his head down to peck her lips. "But thanks anyway."

She walked back to the bar and he followed, grinning. She sat on the bar stool and he stood behind her with an arm on each side of her, extending to the bar. She was boxed in. She looked back at him and raised a haughty eyebrow. He kissed her on the forehead.

She quickly turned her head and there he was, grinning at her in the mirror.

She spoke over his arm, to Laura Lee. "Are you about ready to take me home?"

"I'll take you home," he said from behind.

"No, you're getting too cute for words."

"C'mon. I won't do anything you don't want me to do."

"Laura Lee, are you ready?"

Laura Lee was hesitant because she had Billy.

The man from the filling station banged open the screen door and bellowed, "Jesse! Another dead one!"

## VII

THE CROWD OF MEN and women and teenagers all ran down the hill to the boat dock. Already, four spotlights from docked boats were focused across the water onto a nude male body hanging upside-down on the tall wooden cross that Jesse had noticed that morning.

Jesse and Billy jumped into Jesse's boat and sped across the river. "He might still be alive," Billy said.

Jesse drove his boat into the sandy shoreline. He fixed his spotlight on the upside-down body, and he and Billy jumped into the shallows and waded ashore. Jesse looked up at the seventeen year old Philip Tyree, another one of the six boys, and the one who had sat quiet at the end of the table and said nothing when the boys were at the police station.

Billy stared up at the youth. "He's stiff as a board. For some reason he's been stabbed numerous times in his thighs

and ankles, before he was tied to that . . . looks like a cross."

Jesse nodded. "One of us is gonna have to shimmy up that pole and cut him loose."

"I'll do it," and Billy went behind the cross and shimmied up to the top. Philip was secured by a rope, tightly bound around his knees. Billy reached into his pocket, got his knife out, and began sawing but the blade dulled on the thick rope. "I need a hatchet or an axe," he called down.

Jesse waded out to his boat and got a hatchet. He brought it back to the bottom of the cross. "Here she comes," and, under-handed, he sent it up. Billy reached out and caught it, unsnapped the cover and dropped it, and began whacking at the rope.

Jesse put his hands under Philip's bare shoulders.

"Here he comes," Billy said, gave the rope another whack and Philip's body crashed down on Jesse.

Jesse and Billy examined the boy. "He's been dead for some time," Jesse said as they looked at the body for wounds.

"All I can see are these stab marks on his ankles and thighs."

"Me too," Jesse said, then pointed to Philip's chest and the shins on his legs. "These rope marks . . . he was probably

tied up somewhere, stabbed and bled to death. Then his dead body carried here."

The ambulance backed down to the boat dock and the throng of people watched silently as Philip's body was put in the back of the ambulance. Jesse saw Johnny, Cicely's brother, but didn't see her. Jesse turned to Billy, "I'll anchor over there and keep my spotlight on the area. Ezra can relieve me when he comes in for the late shift."

"I'll tell him," Billy said and walked up the hill with the others.

Jesse anchored across the river and sat on the floor of the boat, leaning against the side, looking at the spotlighted cross. From behind him, he could hear the chatter of people walking down the hill to the boat dock. "It made Bart sick and he went home," a voice said.

The group was silent for a minute.

"Poor ole Phil," Jesse heard a young male voice say. "I wonder who's doing this," and again there was silence.

Jesse looked over the side of the boat and could see two teenage boys and two girls, and their voices traveled clearly over the water.

"Did you know..." one of the girls said; "of the Twelve Apostles in the Bible, only one died a natural death. John."

"John the Baptist was beheaded," said Sy.

"John the Baptist was not an Apostle," said the girl. "John the Divine was the Apostle that died a natural death."

"Hmph."

"I know this is only coincidence," said the girl, "but don't you find it strange that James the Apostle was beheaded, as was our friend James. Thomas the Apostle was stoned to death and then speared—like our Thomas. And Philip—he was stabbed in the ankles and thighs and crucified upside-down on a tall cross."

The four were silent.

The girl said, "Bartholomew was skinned before he died."

"Great!" said the curly-haired Michael, and flipped his cigarette out onto the river. "He'll be delighted to hear that piece of news. I guess I'm lucky—there was no Michael the Apostle."

"But your name's Michael James," the girl said, "and there were two James that were Apostles."

"Hey, Bicky Lou!" Michael bellowed. "Why don't you shut up! You're givin' me the creeps."

The foursome was silent.

"Okay," Michael said. "How'd the second James die... I know you're dying to tell me."

"He was thrown from a pinnacle."

"Aw, go on," Michael said.

"I forgot how my namesake died," Sy said. "How'd Simon get it?"

"He was sawed to pieces."

Absolute silence prevailed again. "Michael lit another cigarette, then rubbed the goose-pimples on his arms. 'Let's talk about something else. Say Sy, I saw ole Boo Hoo hangin' around tonight. I haven't seen him since that day in the woods.'"

Sy chuckled. "Was he still crying?"

"Nope, just staring over at Phil hanging—anyway," and Michael turned to Bicky Lou. "You know about Boo Hoo, don't you?"

"Yeah."

Michael snickered. "I'll never forget that day when the six of us were out huntin' in the woods and shot his dog. Then we saw the litter of puppies and, rather than have them starve to death, we stomped them all. Well, ole Boo Hoo comes tearing out of the trees and starts crying and carrying on—just 'cause we shot his mangey dog and stomped those yelping puppies."

"That's really funny," Bicky Lou said.

"No it's not," her sister said. "It makes me sick."

"Aw, you're a real drip, you know that?" Michael said and pushed the sister off the dock and she splashed into the water.

Jesse looked up over the boat again and saw Michael, Sy and Bicky Lou walking back up the road, while the sister waded out of the river.

Ezra came walking down the hill.

The gray-haired Felix came out of the hamburger stand. "Hi, Felix," Michael said cheerfully.

Felix grunted.

"Say Felix, would you do us a favor?" and Michael extended a dollar. "Go get us some beer from Earl's?"

Felix was sullen. "I don't want to be seen with any of you boys. Somebody's after you and I want to stay clear of you." He took the dollar. "I'll get the beer," and he left in his truck and Michael and Sy walked down to Earl's. When Felix came out they were waiting, and Felix gave them the beer. "You owe me nine cents," he said as he got in his truck and left.

Michael shook his head. "I'm used to people being scared of us, but not to being scared to be seen with us. Oh well, got your opener?"

Sy reached into his pocket. "Let's go up on the roof," and

they went up rickety back steps to reach the flat, tar and gravel roof where they opened the beer bottles and guzzled down the beer.

Sy looked over the foot-high ledge. "This is a good safe place. Way up high, in the middle of town, and lights all over down there. I'll bet I can hit that *Tackle 'n Bait* sign way down there," and Sy slung his bottle and it crashed on the ground.

"You couldn't hit the broad side of a barn. Watch this," and Michael sailed his bottle and it passed over the sign, breaking on the sidewalk.

Before dawn, a rooster crowed, and an occasional bird chirped before the light of day. On the rickety back steps, a dark image crept up, his jeans too short above his boots. He stepped onto the roof, then stood silent. The gravel on the roof crunched slightly but the two snoring boys heard nothing.

Big hands reached down and lifted Michael, then threw him over the two-story building and he smashed on the sidewalk.

## VIII

THE HEADLINE ON THE newspaper read: APOSTLE MURDERS.

"Yeah," Jesse said as he

handed the newspaper back to the slick dude in the white shirt, immaculate black trousers and shiny black shoes. "I've been expecting something like this." Jesse sat on the edge of his desk and picked up a piece of paper, reading, "And you're Mr. Burleigh from Jefferson City?"

The slender man, who looked in his early thirties, nodded his black headful of hair. "The governor believes you might need some assistance." Burleigh looked again at the newspaper, added, "Quite a story."

Jesse nodded. "The girl responsible for it is out campin' with her family and won't be back for a week."

Burleigh laid the newspaper on Jesse's desk, then put his hands in his trouser pockets. "Do you have any suspects, sheriff?"

"A few," and Jesse motioned to a stack of papers on his desk. "This is all our reports." Jesse motioned to the desk next to his. "Make yourself to home."

Burleigh took his hands out of his pockets to pick up the stack and set it on the next desk. "Have you made an arrest?"

"Nope. If we arrested everyone that had a motive, we'd have us a ghost town."

Burleigh shrugged. "I see. Well—what do you plan to do?"



"Guard the remaining two boys, is what I had in mind. Now that you and your assistant are here," Jesse glanced to the door, where another impeccably dressed man stood. "You can handle the local matters here in town, and we can devote our full attention to the boys."

"The governor wants the four murders solved."

"So do we."

Burleigh looked around. "How many men are available here?"

"Six. We have two men on the day shift, me and another have evenings, Possum has nights and we have a relief man, Ezra."

"I can get all the men you need."

"Good. We're all working too many shifts."

Burleigh nodded. "I'll send for two men to protect the boys."

Jesse shook his head. "We know the woods and most of the hidin' places. It'd be hard to lose us, whereas, with a stranger..."

"I agree," Burleigh said, unsmiling. "But I find it hard to believe that anyone would want to escape from someone who's protecting their life."

"You're not dealing with the average ordinary boy, Mr. Burleigh." Jesse looked over at the

man by the door and observed his long pointed nose, then looked at the clock on the wall. "Well, I'm scheduled to relieve the man guarding Sy."

"Jesse! Jesse!" A voice crackled loudly.

Jesse hurried to the radio unit and picked up the microphone. "Yeah, this is Jesse!"

"Bad news!" the voice said. "Ezra's been hit in the head. He's dead!"

Jesse's open mouth finally answered, "Dead! Wasn't he guarding Bart?"

"Yep, but Bart's nowhere around."

In front of him, Jesse noticed Burleigh's shoes as Burleigh rocked on his heels. His hands folded in front of him and his expression was smug. "You locals can handle this yourself, can you?"

Jesse barked into the microphone, "Get townspeople and dogs to help find Bart! It had to happen within the last four hours. And bring in Mr. Young. Get Lukey to go with you." Jesse put down the microphone and walked to the door.

Burleigh cleared his throat loudly. "If I'm not here, sheriff, I'll be at the motel. Keep me posted."

Jesse found Billy sitting on a bar stool at Earl's. "Do you

want to ride around and do some Bart-huntin'? Or do you want to help Possum bring in Mr. Young?"

"Mr. Young?"

"In case anything else happens, he'll have an airtight alibi."

Billy gave it thought. "Possum won't need any help. I'll go Bart-huntin'."

As they talked, they watched Sy. He was sitting in a corner booth with a man who looked in his twenties. "Only his brother has the guts to associate with him," Billy said.

Sy and his brother made little in the way of conversation. They just ate potato chips, drank beer and chain smoked.

Earl walked over to Jesse and Billy. "If it was me," Earl said, "I'd go home and sit with a shotgun on my knees while I waited for Bart."

"Ezra might've been killed so's Bart could be the next victim," Jesse said.

"Maybe," said Earl.

Sy slid out from the booth and walked toward the men's room. Jesse followed swiftly. Sy entered the door marked REST ROOMS and went down the narrow hall, passing the door marked. WOMEN.

Jesse opened the REST ROOM door and saw Sy entering the second door. Jesse hurried to it and opened the door.

Sy smirked "Now it's your turn, huh? I had old Lukey four hours, and then Billy."

Jesse nodded.

"And who do I get at eleven? Ole Possum?"

Jesse nodded.

Sy snorted. "And will he tuck me in bed?"

"And then sit by your side."

"I don't know if I like this or not."

"Be content that you're alive to complain."

Sy finished and went to the door. "Anywhere in particular you'd like to go? A movie?"

"Right here in town. I'm fine."

Sy went back to his corner booth and Jesse returned to Billy. Three booths were filled, as well as three tables, and all but two of the stools at the bar.

"It looks like our town's become a tourist attraction," Billy said.

Cicely and Laura Lee came in, both wearing white peasant blouses, snug jeans, and white sandals. They looked at all the strange faces. "What's going on?" Cicely asked Jesse.

"They've come for the next murder."

"You're joking!" Laura Lee said and leaned on Billy. "Right now, it's a good place *not* to come. Why, I'm so scared, I've got Cicely living with me for

awhile. I don't want to be living alone in this town."

Jesse looked at Cicely. "Why don't you and Laura Lee live at your house? You'd have more people around."

"We don't want to drive on that road, back and forth to work."

Jesse glanced to the corner booth where stringy-haired Sy and his brother sat silent, looking at the patrons.

Cicely looked back, too. "Oh, you're working?"

"Yep."

"Want us to move on down?" she asked.

"No, I like your company"—He glanced down at her—"as long as you don't distract me." He smiled. "Say, I wonder . . . would you, or Laura Lee, know anyone called Boo Hoo?"

"Boo Hoo?" and Cicely shook her head in the negative, then turned to Laura Lee. "Do you?"

"No."

Billy straightened his holster on his hip. "I better be gettin' on."

Burleigh and his assistant came into Earl's, looked around, then walked down to Jesse and Billy. Cicely and Laura Lee walked further along the bar and found stools.

Burleigh watched them go, then turned back to Jesse. "I've glanced over the reports. Do

you have any new suspects?"

"A few."

Burleigh's grin was stiff. "Mr. Young has the best motive."

"It's a good one."

Burleigh glanced down the bar, then leaned on it to order a scotch and water.

"I've only got a three-two license," Earl said.

"All right, I'll have a beer then." While Burleigh waited he looked down the bar again. "That blonde is a nice little number. Is she considered anyone's special property?"

Jesse said nothing.

Burleigh turned to Billy. "Do you know anything about her? I mean, what's she like? Is she available?"

"Available for what?" Jesse asked.

Burleigh smiled, then poured his beer and took a drink. "Well, I think I'll wander up and meet the young lady."

"Hands off, City Boy," Jesse said. "You might be the town stud in Jeff City, but you're here now . . . and you and Pinocchio are here for just one reason—police work."

Burleigh raised an eyebrow and studied Jesse, then said, "I think we should leave it up to her, don't you?"

"No, I'm leavin' it up to you. You have a choice. You can keep your pretty face, or, you can fool around and have

someone make a mess of your features."

Burleigh turned to his assistant. "That sounds like a threat of assault. You're my witness." Burleigh turned back to Jesse. "You and whose army is going to accomplish this?"

"Just the three of us—me, myself, and I."

Burleigh chuckled, then stuck his tongue in his cheek as he studied Jesse. "Okay." He put a dollar on the bar. "Why didn't you just say you were sweet on her. Oh, you don't mind if I finish my beer, do you?"

Sy and his brother got up from the booth and went out the front door. Jesse followed them to the hamburger stand, where he spent an hour standing outside while they sat inside at the counter.

Jesse glanced down the street and saw Burleigh, Cicely and Laura Lee leaving Earl's. As they walked down the street, Burleigh rested his hand on Cicely's shoulder, friendly-like.

Jesse looked back to the hamburger stand and saw Sy suddenly bolt for the kitchen. Jesse ran around the back and entered through the kitchen door. Sy stood grinning and leaning on a sink. "I just thought I'd see if you were on the ball."

Jesse rested his hands on his

hips. "What's wrong with you boy? This is no game!"

Sy shrugged. "I don't know why I did it. We're making a lot of jokes about the tail on us, and how we're not cows and ain't got no flies to shush but... your bein' around is a comfort to me." Sy shrugged. "Just wanted you to know."

"Tell me," and Jesse crossed his arms, "the time you were all at the nudist camp and Bart got caught and slapped around. did you five guys help him?"

"No, we were all running. Bart got away on his own. Oh, wait a minute. Bart is *not* the one goin' around killing us!"

Jesse shrugged. "Somebody is, and the motive doesn't have to be a great big one, like Mr. Young's. No, it could be something that seems trivial to you but—by the way, who is this Boo Hoo?"

Sy chuckled. "Aw, forget Boo Hoo. He couldn't fight his way out of a wet paper bag."

"Sy!" the waitress called from the front. "You're wanted on the phone."

Sy hurried to the door. "I'll be goin' home soon. Talk to you then." He opened the door hurriedly and went to the pay phone on the wall where the receiver dangled. He picked it up and put it to his ear.

"Hello." He listened, then whispered, "I can't get Bart any

money." Sy turned to look at Jesse again outside. "Where's he going to go?" Then, "How's he goin' to get to St. Louis? He can't hitchhike!"

Again Sy listened, then snickered, "Oh, he's going to steal your Dad's truck."

Sy smiled, said, "No, I don't want to go. Did he say who got Ezra?" Sy listened with open mouth, said, "Did you say Mrs. Young?" He shook his head, added, "Who ever would've thought it. Tell Bart he doesn't have to run. Everybody'll believe it, eventually. He had no reason to kill Ezra."

Sy listened, said, "Maybe," then he listened again, said, "I'd like to, but I don't know how I could manage it. Tell him I've got Jesse for a tail and he's stickin' like glue, but I'll try to get there—and I hope I don't run into Mrs. Young on the way." Sy listened and laughed, said, "Okay, I'll try."

The conversation ended but Sy remained with the phone. He looked down at the floor, then bent down and hastily crawled into the kitchen, out the back door and ran.

## IX

THE FISHERMAN STOPPED rowing and stared at the large goose-shaped loon as it rode atop a floating pink object going

downriver. "I've never seen a loon outa the water," the fisherman mumbled as he turned on his flashlight and it shone out over the water, illuminating the loon as it rode downriver.

In a motorboat, Possum sat beside the driver and looked at the night-shrouded black trees. The river search was ending for lack of light.

"Look't *that*!" Possum said, and pointed. "It's that loon and he's out of the water."

"That's unusual," the driver said and steered toward the loon, who slid from his perch and glided upstream. When he was far away from the boat the loon filled the night with his eerie cry.

The boat pursued the floating object. When they came alongside, Possum said, "Hey! It's got arms and legs on it!" And, to the driver, "You got some gloves I can use?"

The driver opened a compartment and handed gloves to Possum, who quickly stuck his hands into them. Possum pulled off his combat boots and jumped into the water and swam to the floating corpse, grabbed it by an ankle and swam it to the bank alongside the boat dock. Possum walked from the water and dragged the naked body behind him. He dropped it, then stared at it

until the driver docked his boat and came down to where Possum still stared.

"Is it Bart?"

"I think so." Possum shook his head. "He's been beaten and... it's the worst job of skinning I've ever seen." He looked at the driver. "Accordin' to Jesse, Bart would either be the murderer or another victim. And if he was a victim, he was supposed to be beaten up."

"And he was," the driver observed.

"Skinned."

"The sloppiest skinnin' job I ever did see."

"And," Possum went on, "he should have been crucified, but something must've went wrong. Bart was probably hidden near the water and either the loon or the current floated him out." He shook his head again. "Gawd, what an awful mess that is!"

"You want me to go get Jesse?"

"No, he's takin' Cicely home. Just go up to the station and bring down anyone who's there."

\* \* \*

"You just can't know what an awful thing it is to see two lawmen fist-fighting!" Cicely said excitedly as they drove up the highway.

"Look, I didn't call you. You called me, sayin' Burleigh was givin' you a hard time." Jesse looked over at the torn sleeve on her blouse.

"What do you mean! You're bringing Johnny in for questioning? So what if he *was* in town when two murders were discovered? So were a lot of people!"

"But they lived there. And the first two bodies were near your house." He looked over at her and the dials of the dashboard illuminated her incredulous expression. "We're not arresting him. We just want to talk to him and see if his footprint matches the one we lifted from beneath Phil's cross."

Cicely looked out the window and fumed. She looked back at him. "And he's got no motive! If anyone's got a motive, I'd say *you* had one!"

Jesse chuckled.

"Ha, ha!" she said. "But your motive is subtle... it's perfection. You want me to stop smoking; you called me a tramp."

"I didn't call you a tramp. I asked if you had enough tramp-around."

"Oh, that's so *much* nicer. Back to *your* motive—you want everyone to be faultless and the six boys were far from that! I'm thinkin' that maybe you

wanted to clean up *your* town."

Jesse turned onto the rocky country road and was silent.

"And wasn't it convenient the way you let Sy escape."

Jesse slowed the car to ford the first creek, driving through it cautiously. He cleared it and drove down the white chat road.

He neared the second crossing of the creek and stopped the car, both of them looking at R.A.'s red truck, which was parked across the creek, blocking it. Jesse and Cicely sat stared. Then Jesse turned on his spotlight and flashed it around. "Well, I guess I'll try to move it."

"No! Jesse!" She gripped his arm. "Don't get out! It was purposely put there! I've got a feeling!"

"Calm down, Cicely. Your Daddy, or someone, was going to town and simply hit a hole. You can see that the wheel is sunk out of sight." Jesse picked up his microphone. "Billy?" Then he waited. "Billy? It's me—Jesse."

A yawn answered. "Oh, no, Jesse, say it's not you. Do you know how long it's been since I've had any sleep?"

"Okay, but I need a chain to pull a truck out of the creek. I'm on Cicely's road."

"Okay." Billy's end went dead.

Jesse slowly replaced the microphone, then started to open his door.

"No, Jesse! Wait till the chain gets here!" Her eyes were wide and fearful and her grip tightened. "Don't get out!"

"You *are* spooked." He smiled. "I'll only be a minute." He got out and left the door open.

"Oh . . ." Cicely moaned as she stared out at the weeds alongside the road. She rolled up her window, locked her door, then slid over to his side and closed the door, locked it and rolled up the window.

Illuminated by the car's headlights, Jesse went up to the truck and looked in, then walked around it. Cicely watched him, as well as both sides of the car and the darkness behind it. Jesse had left the motor running, so Cicely put the gear in reverse to activate the back-up lights and illuminate the rear area behind her.

Jesse came back to the car and motioned for her to get out. "C'mon, Ill walk you up to the house."

"Walk me!" She sounded horrified, shook her head. "Oh, no—you're not getting me out *there*!" She continued to shake her head slowly.

"Whoever murdered all those boys, doesn't want *us*."

"Really? And how do you know this, unless . . ."

He reached for the door handle but it was locked. He stared at Cicely through the glass. "Open up, Cicely."

"No, Jesse, I'm not getting out until Billy gets here."

Jesse grinned through the glass. "What makes you think that Billy isn't in this, with me?" He reached for his holster. "I guess I'll have to shoot the lock off."

Cicely took her foot off the brake, stomped on the gas and shot backwards. Jesse stood with his hands on his hips, watching with disbelief, then began to chase the car.

Cicely snapped the steering wheel and the back of the car slid sideways off the road into the weeds. She saw him running toward her. She struggled to move the gearshift but they ground and she was unable to put it in high. Then it went into first. She gunned the motor and pulled free of the weeds, the back of the car fish-tailing as she sped away from Jesse down the rocky road, throwing a lot of dirt and gravel at him.

As she drove, Cicely's hands began to shake on the steering wheel. She stared wide-eyed at the shape that loomed up before her, then recognized her brother Johnny. She slowed

down and he hurried to the door on the passenger side. She leaned over to unlock it.

"Hurry up! *Hurry!* Jesse's after me!" Her voice sounded hysterical.

"Yeah, I could hear it all." Johnny jumped into the car and Cicely sped away before he could close the door. Her voice was shrill and broken when she screamed, "It's Jesse! *He's* the murderer!"

"He is?"

She nodded. "He wanted to clean up the town, but nobody would prosecute the boys!" So now he's gone crazy and wants to keep on killing!"

"But why you?"

Cicely waved an erratic hand in the air. "Oh, I'm a bad girl . . . so he thinks!" Cicely reached the highway and slowed down, then pulled onto the highway, again fish-tailing. Johnny lurched in the seat.

"Are you sure about Jesse?"

"Yes!" She practically screamed it. "I'm sure!" and Cicely's hands were shaking on the steering wheel. "I can't prove it, but I know it! *I feel it!*"

Johnny gripped the top of the dashboard. "You better let me drive before you kill us both."

"Good! I'm shaking all over!" She stopped the car right on the highway. Johnny slid over behind the steering wheel, so Cicely opened the car door and



jumped out, running around the front to the door on the passenger side.

She could hear a car coming down the highway, then saw its headlights. When she reached the passenger side, Johnny sped off, leaving her standing.

"Johnny!" she screamed. "Don't leave me out here alone!"

Cicely looked back to the country road, then started running down the highway toward town.

Johnny sped down the winding highway and, when he neared town, saw a flashing dome-light of the police car as it came toward him.

A large oil truck suddenly loomed before Johnny and he slammed on the brakes and swerved off the road, steering the car as he drove down a steep incline, resting in the creek below the small bridge. Instead of calmly driving out, he gunned the motor. The wheels mired in mud and the car sank to the hub caps.

Johnny scrambled out and climbed the embankment, then stood on the dark highway. Two miles up, Cicely heard the police siren, then saw the whirling red light atop the police car that Billy drove. She waved both her arms in the air, then changed her mind and backed off the highway, hoping

he hadn't seen her. Billy drove on to where Jesse waved to him.

When Cicely saw Jesse, she again ran down the highway, often looking back. She saw Jesse get into Billy's car. The car made a U-turn on the highway, then sped down toward her. Jesse jumped out of the car. "Get in!" and he grabbed her wrist.

Cicely was screaming as she used both fists to fight him away. Jesse tried to catch her wrists but Cicely's hysteria made her strong. He turned her around, wrapped his arms around her and tried to lift her but she kicked and wrenched and screamed. Billy got out of the car and Cicely twisted loose and fled across the highway just as a speeding car came up the other way.

"Look out!" Jesse bellowed and the car jammed on its brakes and skidded far up the highway before it could stop.

Jesse and Billy looked at the spot where Cicely had been, then they ran across the road to look down the embankment. Their heads turned back and forth, but she wasn't there.

The driver of the car looked at the grill, then got down on all fours to look under the car.

"Listen," and Jesse cocked his head to hear her running through the brush. The driver

started walking down to them.

"Forget it!" Billy told him.

"She made it across all right.

"As he and Jesse returned to the police car, Jesse said, "I wonder what she did with my car."

## X

CICELY TORE THROUGH the brush and trees, tearing her blouse, finally came to a halt at the edge of Jack's Fork. She stood staring at the water, then looked behind her but could see nothing in the blackness. The only sounds were of frogs and the crying of the loon.

"Cicely!" she heard someone call her name from down river, but she chose not to answer.

"Cicely!" The voice called again. "It's me!—Johnny!"

"Johnny?"

"Down here!"

She hurried toward him, twice slipping off the bank and into the clear shallow water. Finally she saw him nearby and ran to him, embracing him. "I was so frightened! Why did you leave me stranded on the highway?"

"There was a car coming and I had to move."

"We've got to get away from here, Johnny."

"Mom and Dad will hide us from Jesse." He looked back to the light by the boat dock.

"Let's keep off the roads. We'll go by water."

They hurried back to the many boats. Then they stood silent, surveying to see if anyone was around. In the faint light, Cicely noticed the stains all over his T-shirt. "What's that all over you?"

Johnny smirked down at his clothes and arms, and his chuckle was more like a gurgle. "Red ocher. I was helping ole Bailey mark his goats. It doesn't wash off,"

He went down to the dock alone, got in a canoe and pushed away, then paddled silently toward her. While he held onto an overhanging limb, she leaned down to climb in the back of the canoe and noticed the stains all over her blouse.

"It doesn't wipe off?" she murmured as she sat down and picked up a paddle.

They went silently up Jack's Fork, and the sound of the nocturnal river creatures was loud. As they glided by the saw-mill, Johnny snorted, chuckled, and then burst into laughter that grew so uncontrolled as to be almost soundless. His shoulders quivered with it.

Cicely smiled. "What's so funny?"

Johnny's laughter possessed him so that he was unable to speak. He tried pointing toward the sawmill.

Cicely looked at the small dark wooden structure.

"Si . . . i . . . mon!" he finally managed to say.

"Simon's in the sawmill?"

Johnny's laugh began again. "He's all over in there!"

Cicely looked down at her splattered white blouse and knew it was Simon's blood.

Johnny stood up in the canoe, now deathly silent. Cicely put a hand on each side to maintain the balance of the canoe, and it slowly turned around and began drifting back in the direction of the dock.

Johnny put his head back. His arms were straight out from his sides. He began imitating the weird cry of the loon. Five times he emitted the sound. Cicely stared at him with open mouth.

"My sweet Missey!" Johnny wailed. "I have avenged you!"

"Johnny!" Cicely gasped. "You're nutty as a fruitcake."

Johnny's arms slowly returned to his sides and he snapped his four-inch blade out. He took a step toward her.

"Johnny," she whispered. "I never hurt ole Missey."

Jesse's boat came alongside the canoe and halted, and he and Billy carefully aimed their revolvers. "Put it down, Johnny!" Jesse called loudly.

Johnny lunged for Cicely with knife upraised. Jesse's

first shot tore an opening in Johnny's forehead and, though Johnny was a dead man, Jesse and Billy pumped bullets into the standing corpse. Johnny crumpled rolled into the water.

Jesse reached over to the canoe and plucked Cicely into his boat and held her tightly. Billy looked down into the water and it was clear, like looking through a glass-bottomed boat. The dark image of Johnny lay on the bottom.

"It was because of Missey," Cicely said. "Johnny was the one called Boo Hoo . . . and Missey was the dog they shot, and it was her puppies they stomped to death. Johnny was always reading the Bible."

Jesse nodded.

"Poor ole Johnny . . . loved his little dog," Billy said softly. He removed his shoes and holster.

He dived into the water and swam to Johnny, grasped Johnny's wrist and towed him to the surface. Johnny floated on his back, his arms outstretched and his body fitted into the moonlit shadow of a cross. Billy turned to look behind him, at the tall wooden cross that had once held Philip.

Jesse looked at the weird apparition of Johnny in the shadow of the cross. He reached down and hauled the wet body into the boat. Billy climbed aboard and they headed for shore.

# ALONE AT LAST

by ANITA ZELMAN

WINTER WITH ITS SUN-DRENCHED days, clear, cloudless blue skies and starry nights was the season Harriet loved most. She thanked the happy day that she had discovered Palm Desert and realized she was meant to be a desert rat and a solitary one at that, grateful for her beautiful aloneness, as solitary as the single palm that stood beside her front door.

The interior of her house reflected the colors of the desert, beige sand tones, blue of the sky and an occasional burst of sun orange or red in the form of pillows or prints on the wall. There was a large statue of a rain god on the coffee table. Heavenly.

Could ever a divorce have worked out as well as hers? Take dinner, for example. In ten minutes, or fifteen or maybe even thirty, she would

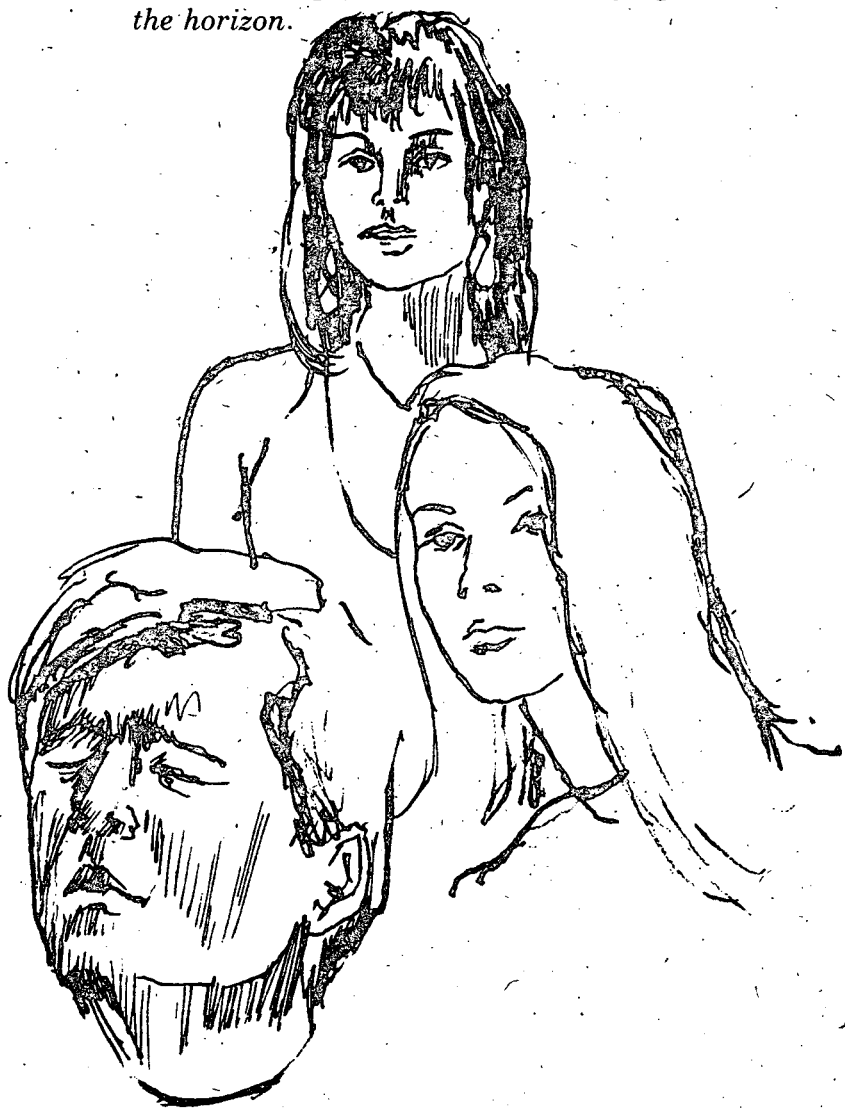
get up, walk to the kitchen and fix whatever she darn well pleased. For herself, that is. Her magnificent, crazy Afghan hound named Peace wanted his meal to be at a regular hour.

"Peace, you're as bad as a husband. No, not really. I'm sorry, didn't meant that," Harriet apologized.

She went to the kitchen to fix his dinner and looked out of the large glass window over her sink. The most beautiful part of the day in the desert was when the sun was leaving it. Long shadows lay along the rocks. The hills in the distance were sharply etched against the sky and they, too, cast giant shadows.

She gave Peace his food. The doorbell rang. Absurd. No one rang her doorbell, ever. Any salesman enterprising enough to come over the awful road

*Harriet lived in the desert because she wanted the freedom of solitude. But solitude can come high—with loneliness lying over the horizon.*



that led to her isolated house would deserve to have her buy three full sets of encyclopaedias.

"Some swell watch dog you are," she said to Peace, who was bent intently over his dish. She walked to the front door and opened it.

"Aunt Harriet."

Harriet winced. She was too startled at the sight of her niece on the porch to come back with a "Diane, darling." Instead, she stood there, open-mouthed.

"Aren't you going to invite me in, Aunt Harriet?"

"Of course." She embraced her niece. She supposed Diane was still a niece in spite of Harriet's divorce. Diane was Harriet's ex-brother-in-law's only child.

"Diane, my dear, it's good to see you. You look darling, as always." See, she could get back into the old sociability swing if, God forbid, she should ever need to.

Diane walked into the living room. She was dressed in blue jeans and a pale blue body shirt. She threw herself down on the couch. Her face was lovely, her body long and elegant, black hair, blue eyes.

"I like your house," Diane said, looking it over appraisingly. "But it was such a hassle to get here."

Harriet wished she could tell her niece that the house's location was rather the point. Hypocritically, she made hospitable sounds about dinner—just about to fix it."

Diane didn't have any luggage. Good sign and a thought which buoyed Harriet all through dinner preparations.

"Hey, your dog is gorgeous." Diane leaned to pat Peace. He snubbed her.

"He's beautiful," Harriet agreed, "but he's awfully neurotic and a bit of a snob."

When they sat down to dinner, Harriet was amazed to see Diane grab at the food as though she were starving.

"They're expensive, aren't they?" Diane asked when the meal was over.

"What's expensive?"

"Those dogs. Afghans."

An alarm rang in Harriet's head. There had been something about the appraising, calculating way Diane looked around the house when she first came in and something now, about this question and, come to think of it, about Diane's appetite at dinner, that made Harriet suspect her niece might be down and out and looking for a handout. Who knew what young people did these days about work?"

"I have no idea what he cost. He was a gift."

"Oh, a gift from an admirer?" Diane asked.

"No, a friend. There haven't been any admirers since your uncle and I divorced, I'm happy to say."

"Happy? You do look happy; Aunt Harriet, and you've kept your figure, too. Isolation becomes you."

"The desert is a marvelous place. Sand soothes the soul. And you, Diane, what are you doing now?"

"A lot of nothing," Diane answered airily and then yawned. "I think it's time for beddy-bye."

"I'll get you a nightgown," Harriet said.

"No need. I'll go out to the car for my suitcases."

Suitcases? Indeed! The ominous plural upset Harriet.

She barely slept that night. Bad enough to have an unwanted guest in the next room but why did it have to be one who also brought unpleasant memories with her? The girl was Charles's niece, not hers, and Charles had been an awful husband, even by his own admission. They had, if memory served her correctly, once, a very long time ago, been in love. The love, on Harriet's side, had lasted past his first two infidelities.

She had taken all the women's magazine advice and she

had stepped up her grooming, spending gobs of money in the lingerie shops. Idiot. Charles had wanted changes in women, not changes in her nighttime wardrobe. He was a confirmed philanderer. It was his hobby. The women's magazines also told you not to interfere with your husband's hobbies. Now, that was better advice. She stepped out of the marriage.

And hadn't it all worked out beautifully? This house, her dog, the lovely and convenient job of typing Mr. Capman's manuscripts. She delivered them once a week on her way into town for groceries.

"I adore you, my dear," Mr. Capman had told her just last week when she brought the typewritten pages to his house. He really adored his boyfriend, Harriet had heard, so those were safe enough words for a man of his sex habits to say to her.

"You don't," he said, "have children who get all those ghastly diseases. My last manuscript lady—I call them that—'typist' is too cold a word for someone I trust with my papers. She was always behind because her children had leprosy or the plague or any other number of those diseases she called childhood ones. You, my childless dear, are a pearl."

She liked Mr. Capman. His

gushiness, his silliness, couldn't mask the fact that he had a marvelous mind. The proof lay in his manuscripts. She was thrilled whenever his books were published.

The job was pleasant, and private, in her own home. The desert was private. Her house was private. Even her dog was aloof and private, loving only her. Memories of Charles were buried. She did not want her niece in her house. Harriet slept, at last, after making the decision to tell Diane just that in the morning.

She marched into the living room the next day but her niece wasn't there. Neither was she in her room or the kitchen. Harriet frowned and stepped out to her patio. Diane was stretched out on a chaise, soaking up the morning sun, her skin dead white. She would have looked like a slug against the white terry towel on which she rested if it hadn't been for her blue bikini. She looked up.

"Hi, Aunt Harriet. I tried to be quiet so I wouldn't wake you up. Sun is marvelous. Thanks for letting me be here. You'll never know how I needed this beautiful peace and quiet."

Diane's words, the pathetic paleness of her skin and the defenseless look on her face kept Harriet from the prepared speech that would have kicked

her niece out. Harriet would have to get to the speech later—she would not give up her hard earned privacy but there was no harm in letting Diane have a day or so in the sun. But the girl had a father. If she needed security, let her go to him.

"Diane, how are things with your dad? Does he still have that vacation condominium in Newport Beach?" Not very subtle but a good enough beginning.

Diane looked up. "Didn't anyone tell you? Dad died six months ago."

"Oh! Oh, dear, I *am* sorry."

"Don't be. The illness was lingering and messy."

Harriet had rarely thought about her ex-brother-in-law in the last three years but she would certainly have wished him better luck than he had had. To her horror, she found herself muttering phrases like "make yourself at home here" and "the sun is a great healer". She stopped herself, but not soon enough.

"Thank you, Aunt Harriet." Diane looked smug. She stood up, stretched and said, "I think I'll go into town now. May I borrow a ten? My tank is dry. It took a lot of gas to get here."

Harriet got up silently, went to the bedroom for her purse, took out a ten-dollar bill and



vowed that it would be the last cash to pass from her hands to Diane's.

As the next two weeks passed, Peace began to get used to having Diane around but he still snubbed her. Harriet felt that was to the good because she knew Diane would be leaving soon. A young girl could not, would not, take this isolation for long.

She had been to town only twice since she'd been here. Once by herself and once with Harriet. The rest of the time had passed with Diane working on her suntan, helping a little, very little, around the house and smoking a lot.

"It'll be over soon," Harriet told Peace as they sat on the patio. "We'll have the house all to ourselves again."

Peace wagged his magnificent tail. Diane walked out to the patio, dressed in a bandana top and white bell-bottom slacks. Her eyes were carefully made up and her long, dark hair was curled at the ends.

Harriet said, "Have fun."

How much fun could a young woman have in a town the size of Palm Desert? Harriet was amused at the idea of her niece having bothered to dress up to go into town... until she suddenly remembered how Mr. Martin, the town's only attorney, had introduced himself to



Diane when she and Harriet had stopped at the ice cream parlor, last time in. He had preened himself and tried to be charming.

Harriet hoped he wouldn't make the town fun for her niece. She'd force herself not to worry about that. She'd enjoy this beautiful day she was having to herself. Honestly, she would.

Harriet did, finally, as the beloved desert quiet settled into her bones. Later, she drove her car to her secret place and got out and walked. The area was, actually, on her own land, even though she had to drive to get to it. Only in this undeveloped

part of the desert, waterless, electricityless, could one own these vast amounts of worthless nothingness.

She had been thrilled, last year, to discover a cave in the rocks just off the road. It contained several Indian artifacts, pieces of museum quality which she had no intention of sharing with the world. She developed a passion for archaeology.

Today, she pattered around in the cave, did some diggin with the spade she kept handy, then rested and was content.

In the late afternoon, she began, vaguely, to think about dinner preparations. She came home and was making her way to the kitchen when the doorbell rang. She was annoyed. Why did Diane have to forget the keys that Harriet had considerately given her? She walked to the front door and practically flung it open.

A young man stood on the porch, tall, thin, slightly stooped and with a face that Harriet, in her youth, would have called "poetic", darkly handsome.

"Hi," he said. "I'm Arnie and you're Diane's Aunt Harriet, I hope. Otherwise, I hitched in the wrong direction."

"Yes, Yes, I'm Harriet and... you're Arnie," she added lamely. "Well, I... won't you come in?"

"Thanks but I better beat some of the desert dust off of me first. Your house looks too pretty to get dirty." He began to slap at his trousers with his right hand. His left hand, clutched to his side, held only a binder thick with papers and a small package. Harriet was relieved. No unwelcome guest with two suitcases here.

I got a ride to the highway junction but then I had to walk from there. Yours is the only house around this way. You're pretty isolated. It was kind of an adventure to get here."

Peace stared haughtily at the new visitor.

"Hey, you're my dream, fella," Arnie said to the dog. "I've always wanted an Afghan and a fireplace, when I'm ready to settle down, that is. What's your name?"

"Peace Harriet answered for her dog.

"Great name. I've marched for you." Arnie put his belongings on the coffee table, said he admired the statue of the rain god that was there and sat down on the couch.

"You must be very friendly with Diane to have come all this distance to see her." Harriet was immediately sorry that she sounded so stiff.

Arnie smiled. "You might say that." His smile was charming, showing deep creases around

his mouth or were they dimples? No, Harriet decided, 'dimples' wasn't a masculine enough word for what those marvelous creases were.

There was the sound of a key turning in the lock and the front door opened. Diane began to come in and then froze at the sight of Arnie. It was impossible to read the expression in her eyes because she wore blue plastic-rimmed sunglasses but her body language said 'tension'.

"Hi, Diane," Arnie said.

"Hi." She spoke coldly.

"If you take off your shades, I'll be able to see the love light in your eyes."

Diane's right hand came slowly up to the temple of her sunglasses. She removed the frames. Her eyes glared cold hatred at Arnie.

"I told you I wanted to be by myself for a while," she said.

"I figured the 'while' was over. Lonely?"

Diane stared defiantly at Arnie and then her expression began to soften. "Yes, lonely," she said reluctantly and sat next to him on the couch. She reached for his hand. Harriet coughed delicately.

"Oh, Aunt Harriet, this is my husband, Arnie."

"I didn't know you were married but how nice," Harriet said and meant it. So here was this

handsome young man who had come all the way out to her isolated house to claim her niece, to take Diane away from here. This called for drinks all around. Harriet got up to get them.

But things didn't work out quite the way Harriet would have liked. To begin with, she couldn't very well kick Diane and Arnie out at this hour. It was suppertime and the young man had hitched all this way and would want to sleep over. Oh, well, there was the next morning. Harriet prepared supper cheerfully, keeping the next morning and the picture of Diane and Arnie driving off in Diane's car in mind.

Then, surprisingly, she had a marvelous time at her own table. Arnie was fun and his masculine voice, the first to be heard in this house, was pleasant to listen to. He told the two women what had been happening in the big city. When Harriet asked what he did, it turned out that he was a writer for a small magazine.

"And of course I'm always working on my novel, which is an ungrateful beast who just won't get finished," he said.

"But how wonderful!" Harriet said. "To be working on it, I mean. The finishing will happen eventually."

She told him about Mr. Cap-

man, of whom Arnie had, of course, heard. Harriet and Arnie talked and talked while Diane, looking petulant, smoked cigarette after cigarette.

HARRIET WOKE UP the next morning to the sound of the front door slamming. Oh, no, not that nice Arnie being angry with Diane and slamming out of the house. Harriet had heard their angry, quarreling voices coming from their bedroom last night but she had still counted on Arnie to get her niece out of here today. She got up, put on her robe, went to the living room and stopped short when she saw who was sitting there.

"Arnie, well, good morning," she said. "I heard the door slam."

"Diane's tender touch. She left in a hurry. Said she was going into town to help out some attorney. He has a legal secretary, she says, but she's going to be secretary to his secretary."

"Some attorney? There's only one in town. Palm Desert is on the small side. I didn't know she was planning on getting a job. She certainly hasn't mentioned settling in the desert."

"She says she likes it here a lot. I don't blame her."

"But I thought you had come to claim her, so to speak, that

you'd be going off with her to the city."

"I guess I don't figure that much in her plans."

"I don't understand these new marriages. But then," she laughed bitterly, "I guess I didn't understand the old ones, either."

Arnie smiled crookedly, then asked, "Do you mind if I get a few words down on paper today? I promise not to get in your way."

"Be my guest."

Harriet and Arnie spent a peaceful and strangely companionable day. She went about her household chores, did some typing on Mr. Capman's manuscript, rested in the sun, read a book, did a crossword puzzle. Arnie sat at her desk, hunched over a notebook, and alternated between scribbling madly with his pencil and looking up occasionally and staring out about a thousand miles into space.

Once, he got up, paced about the room, did a deep knee bend, grinned at Harriet and said, "No one ever believes that writers work hard. But now you know. This is the extent of my coffee break." He was, in the next second, back to the desk.

In the late afternoon, Arnie finally took leave of the desk and came out to the patio, where Harriet was reclining in the afternoon shade. He

stretched out on a chaise and said, "I upped my word count today. You and the desert are good influences."

"I'm glad."

"You move smoothly. Not like Diane. She's all over the place when I'm trying to work, doing the Bette Davis bit with the cigarettes or else staring tragically out the window. Anything to make me feel like a heel for doing my thing."

They spoke for a while. Arnie talked about the beauty of the desert landscape that stretched out in front of them. Harriet felt wistful. This had been such a lovely day for her, having another human being around who understood what it was like to need solitude and yet was there for the moments when one wished to talk. Yes, she really did feel wistful, knowing that this would end.

But it didn't. Harriet had assumed that when Diane came home, her niece would make arrangements to get an apartment in Palm Desert for herself and her husband. But Diane wasn't rushing and, as the days went by, Harriet would not tell her niece to go because by that time, Harriet was totally, completely, no-fool-like-an-old-fool, one-hundred-percent in love with Arnie.

Her body burned for him. She tried to hide her feelings but

realized later that she must unconsciously have been sending out signals because Arnie did take her to bed. It happened one afternoon when she thought she was being clever by learning to stay away from him. She had resisted the temptation to hang around the desk while he worked, to give him coffee as she had at the beginning of the week.

Harriet had taken a book out to the patio, grown restless with it, had let it fall from her hands while she closed her eyes and tilted her face to the sun and indulged herself in thoughts of Arnie. Then he was there, the real Arnie, bent over her, gently brushing her hair away from her face. She opened her eyes, startled. He kissed her, forcing her lips to part. He led her, silently, to her bedroom.

The afternoon marked a turning point in commitment. She was no longer committed to the desert, to solitude, to making her life smooth and trouble free. She was now committed to Arnie, to her body, to keeping him here, to the intenseness of her pleasures, her passions.

She was so totally committed to him that she even shared her precious secret, the cave. She drove him to it, made him promise never to tell anyone else and watched him, fondly, as he

exclaimed over the Indian artifacts.

Diane was home during the day only on Saturdays and Sundays and Harriet waited out those days, lazily catlike. She tried to be especially nice to Diane whenever she could hoping the girl would stay forever. She even began to give her niece money, although the girl didn't seem to need it now that she was working.

Diane took the money with a sly look. Harriet played the role of the kind aunt but tried not to overdo it. She didn't, after all, want to make Diane suspicious. But what were those sly looks all about?

One Saturday afternoon, the phone rang and Harriet answered it, expecting it to be Mr. Capman. She had grown lazy about his manuscript but she would promise him to get more pages out. Perhaps she'd work today.

"Hello."

"May I speak to Diane?"

Not Mr. Capman. The attorney?

"Just a minute, please." Harriet said, "For you."

Diane looked surprised and irritated. She took the receiver reluctantly.

"Hello," Diane said. "I thought I told you never to call me here." Then she listened, giggled a bit, said, "Well, in

that case..." Diane was speaking in a warm and flirtatious manner and Harriet decided, tactfully, to leave the room. As she turned to head towards the kitchen, she saw Arnie standing there, half hidden in the hall, listening to Diane.

Harriet looked away quickly. She did not like to see the pain on Arnie's face because it was connected with his feelings for Diane. She went on into the kitchen and sat down. Her hands were trembling and she clasped them together and said to herself, "Only for me, please, Arnie, feel that way only for me."

Then the ugly fighting started in the next room. Harriet could hear the jealous viciousness of Arnie's words, the shrillness of Diane's, but Harriet didn't gloat this time. She could only think of the passion of the fighting and wish that Arnie's intensity of feeling would be reserved only for her, Harriet.

The fight ended with a scream and a crash and then deadly silence. A horrible connection was made in Harriet's mind. She rose, went to the kitchen door, hesitated a moment, fearfully, and then opened it. When she stepped from the hall into the living room, she saw Arnie's figure bent over Diane's prostrate one.

He was cradling the girl's head in his arms.

Harriet came closer. Diane had died with her eyes open. There wasn't any blood around and that, somehow, made the death more ghastly to Harriet. The statue of the rain god lay on the floor. Arnie looked up.

"I didn't mean to hit her. I pushed and she fell against the rain god. I've never hit her before." His face was as pale and bloodless as Diane's. "What shall I do?"

"You aren't going to do anything. *I* am." Harriet spoke forcefully. She meant to have her way, to handle the situation, and then Arnie would be hers forever, beholden to her, bound to her.

"What are you going to do?" Arnie asked pitifully. Harriet exulted at the frightened, boyish expression on his face.

"I'm going to hide her and her car where they'll never be found, and then we're both going to try hard to forget that she ever lived."

"But it was an accident. I can tell the police that."

"A husband hitting his wife and killing her, a little, slender thing like her, certainly not self-defense. I wonder what they'd do to you. A small amount of time in jail, not life, of course, but fifteen, twenty years? I don't know."

"She's not my wife," Arnie protested.

"But Diane introduced you as her husband."

"I guess she didn't want to shock you by telling you we lived together. Maybe she was afraid you wouldn't let me stay in her room. Nobody gets married any more."

"Well, all to the good, in this case. Diane seems to be fairly unencumbered by relatives. Her mother died years ago and her father died recently. Her uncle, my ex-husband, is busy with his romances. She won't be missed for years."

"Help me carry her to the car," Harriet directed. Then that will be the end of it for you. I'll drive her body to my cave. It's large enough to hold the car *and* her body."

"But that's your special place," Arnie said. "You'll never be able to go there again."

Harriet was silent, letting Arnie measure the depth of her love for him.

She went outside and held the door of Diane's car open and Arnie placed the body, tenderly, along the back seat.

Harriet went into Diane's bedroom, opened the two suitcases the girl had brought with her and then began to empty Diane's bureau drawers. She took the girl's clothes out

of the closet, her shoes, her handbags.

"God, you're efficient!" Arnie's voice startled her. Harriet looked up to see him staring, hollow-eyed, at her from the doorway. She walked up to him. His face was sweaty and the nervous fear of the sweat from his body gave off an animal odor that excited her.

She put her arms around him and said, "For us. I'm efficient for us." She was aroused to the point of such sexual desire that she began to make small moaning sounds. Arnie pushed her gently away from him. His eyes avoided hers. She understood and was almost amused. He was still burdened with guilt. Her body and its needs would burn that out of him. They would have endless time together now. She would wait.

She took Diane's suitcases and put them in the trunk of the car, then slid into the driver's seat and turned on the ignition.

She had expected to keep her eyes on the road and never look back at Diane's body. It would be a simple matter. But Harriet had not counted on the strength and pull of the dead. She found herself slowing the car, putting on the brakes and turning to look at her niece's face. A great wave of pity swept over her at the sight of the girl's defense-

less expression. The pout was no longer there, replaced now by a beauty, a somber stillness. Harriet turned and began to drive.

\* \* \*

"Taken care of," she told Arnie succinctly when she returned to the house, caked with dried sweat and desert dust from her two-hour walk. "And not to be referred to again."

About that part, she was right. Neither of them referred to Diane again but she was between them more heavily now that she was dead. Arnie seemed numb and depressed all through Sunday. On Monday morning, he began to work on his manuscript and his bent head looked almost normal until the shrill ringing of the phone sounded. His head jerked up and he stared in panic at Harriet.

She got up, calmly, walked to the phone, picked up the receiver.

"Why, Mr. Martin, sorry she didn't come into work for you. No, you can't, I'm sorry, she's out walking right now. But I doubt that she'll be reporting to work tomorrow, either. She's planning to leave for the city."

Harriet listened for a minute and then said, "Sorry, I guess young people these days just



don't give notice the way they used to."

Arnie stared at her when she hung up.

"Don't worry," she said. "Diane hardly worked there long enough for him to make a fuss about it, even if they might have been personally involved."

She couldn't keep her self from that last dig and it had given her a small sense of satisfaction.

But she, herself, felt panic two days later when the doorbell rang in the late afternoon. Diane and Arnie were the only ones ever to ring that bell in the three years Harriet had been here and she was overcome with the eerie feeling that she would open the door to find Diane standing there. It was almost with a sense of relief that she found Mr. Martin, the attorney, on her doorstep.

"I thought you might help me," he said. "Diane didn't have any other address but yours on her application and I would very much like to get in touch with her wherever she goes."

Arnie suddenly appeared in the living room. "I'll bet you would," he said offensively.

Mr. Martin raised an inquiring brow.

"I'm Diane's husband," Arnie said.

Harriet, in spite of her ten-

sion, was amused at the stunned expression on the attorney's face. She began to relax as she realized Arnie couldn't have chosen a better method of discouraging the man than to announce that he was Diane's husband. It was doubly amusing because Diane had been the single girl Mr. Martin thought she was.

"Why, I didn't know. I'm sorry," Mr. Martin said.

"Why should you be sorry. I'm not," Arnie said.

The attorney was badly flustered. He looked to Harriet. "I guess I won't bother you for that address," he said as he turned away.

It was Harriet's last brush with humor for quite a while. The absolutely humorless, depressing days that lay ahead became a burden of despair that she would never forget.

"I love you," she said once from across the room to Arnie's silent, brooding figure. He looked at her with such an expression of hopelessness that she dared not say more. She was in a frantic state to keep him. Her every move was directed towards that end, so she was surprised at the sense of relief, the feeling of oh-my-so-this-is-the-way-it's-going-to-turn-that came when Arnie announced he was leaving.

She made no move to go to-

wards him. She knew that if they touched, she'd cry. So, she let him go without speeches, without tears, without a so much as a 'take care of yourself'. It was a though, in this silence, she was preparing herself for the greater silence that was to come, the deathly stillness upon his leaving the house.

She indulged herself in her grief until she found that frantic activity could be somewhat of a solace.

"We have to work," she told Peace, "if you want to be kept in the best style of dogfood."

She typed away at Mr. Capman's manuscript as though it were due to be sent to his agent momentarily. Every word of his manuscript, his writing of pain, of loss, all those things that Mr. Capman had done so well in the past were all fresh to her now. She used to marvel at the brilliancy of his phrases. Now, she marvelled at their depth, which touched upon her heart.

She drove into town that week to give him the mounds of paper she had typed.

"My dear, thank you, thank you! To think I had been about to complain that you were lagging behind. Now the paper's coming out of your wonderful machine faster than the ideas coming out of my brain. How's your niece?"

"She left. Went home, back to

the city," Harriet said happily.

"You look relieved."

"Peace is all the company I need. My dog, that is. But peace, in general, I guess." She sounded airy and casual and felt smug about her control. How easy it had been to dispose of Diane verbally. The attorney and Mr. Capman, why, they'd never ask about her niece again.

She took the new, thick bundle of pages the author handed her and commented happily about the fact that he seemed to be in a prolific state.

She had been cheerful in town but as she drove the long road that led to her isolated house, gloom began to descend again. Her smugness about Diane being so verbally disposable could apply equally to herself. Who cared about Harriet, really? She could just as easily have disappeared from the scene. And there would be no young, handsome attorney to make inquiries about her.

Later, she sat on a chaise on her patio, stonily staring out at the desert landscapem It was harshm The limitless horizon that had said 'serenity' to her now looked forbidding.

THE NEXT DAY, she began to reach a different level. She stopped putting so much effort into forgetting and she became

calmer—as the weeks went by, almost happy.

She realized the 'almost happy' was an absolute untruth the day her doorbell rang. A giant surge of hope sprang up in her and she hurried, breathless and eager as a young girl, to the door. When she opened it and saw that Arnie was not standing there, her disappointment was so great that she could not speak to the two strangers who stood before her.

They were middle-aged men, one with the leathery, wrinkled skin of someone who has lived too long, hatless, in the desert.

"Harriet Johnson?" he inquired.

"Yes."

He held a leather-encased card toward her. Palm Desert Police. "May we come in?"

"Of course."

They seated themselves and the leather-skinned one began to ask her questions about her ex-husband's niece.

"I hope there's nothing wrong," Harriet said. "A lovely girl. She visited me not long ago."

"I see. Her father left a will, a relatively small estate but it had just come out of probate and the bank was looking for your niece to settle that amount on her. Their inquiries led them to a young man, Arnie, a writer. She'd been living

with him. He seems to be undergoing some form of mental breakdown and is seeing a psychiatrist. Arnie came up with the accusation that you had accidentally killed your niece and then hid her body and car in a cave. He's drawn a map of just where the cave is."

"How nice of him to say 'accidentally'," Harriet said wryly. "But what an imagination these writers have. I can assure you I would not kill my niece accidentally or on purpose."

"When was the last time you saw her?"

"Why, the day she and her husband drove off together. You said that she and Arnie had been living together. Well, Diane had introduced him as her husband. She must have known I wouldn't have let him stay over otherwise."

"And he did stay?"

"Oh, yes, made himself quite at home. Did some writing."

The policeman asked more questions and Harriet answered in a relaxed, direct manner.

"Would you mind," the leather-faced one asked, "if we searched the cave?"

"Of course not. I'll take you there. You know, this accusation would be almost amusing if the circumstances weren't so sad. You did say the young man was undergoing some sort of collapse? But the amusing

thing is I can't imagine a more public place to hide a body."

"Public? Arnie described it as secluded and being on land that you own."

"Not any more. I deeded it to the state, right after my niece left town, as a matter of fact. I'd been too busy entertaining her to get around to it before."

Both men looked chagrined.

"This is kind of embarrassing, ma'am, and it would seem there's no need in our looking but do you mind if we do just for our reports?"

"I'll get my car keys."

to herself until they came out of the cave.

"No body or car in there," the policeman said.

"I didn't think there would be," Harriet said. "After all, I did see Arnie drive off with Diane but I'm beginning to wonder why the bank can't locate her."

"It's something worth mentioning in our report."

They dropped Harriet at her house and she poured herself a diet drink, though what she was saving her figure for she couldn't imagine. She took the drink to the patio and stretched out on the chaise, remembering to the other time she had been driving towards the cave, when she had turned and seen Diane's face, lovely even in death.

At that moment, she had re-

alized that if Arnie had loved her niece enough to kill her, the ultimate betrayal, how much easier it would be for him to betray her, Harriet. She had turned the car around and headed toward remote Desert Canyon, where she got out, released the brakes and pushed the car over the edge. After Arnie left her, she had gone to the State Hall to tell them of her "new" discovery. They had sent a professor of archaeology and he was overjoyed at the find. She had graciously consented to deed that part of her land to the state.

Of course, the car would be discovered in the canyon someday, eventually, but then it wouldn't be her problem. Arnie was the crazy young man, the one the police would have down on record as having made false accusations, the one she, Harriet, had seen drive off with her niece. There was nothing for her to worry about. Only the hurt that Arnie's actions had been so predictable.

She looked out at the honest, beautiful bareness of the desert. She was so alone. She sipped her drink, then put the frosty glass to her forehead and cooled her brow.

Sleeping pills. Maybe next week. Lots of them. Then she'd be alone, alone at last.

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SEPTEMBER, 1977

# The Empty House

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by **DANA LYON**

*Mrs. Wayne had vanished into thin air and it was Deputy Moffatt's job to find out where she had gone and why. The way it turned out, her disappearance was deadlier than any magician's trick.*

AS USUAL, MELVYN WAYNE slept soundly that Saturday night. It was part of his routine, and routine was what he lived by. Dinner (when he was home from one of his trips) at six-thirty, newspaper sports section at seven, TV at eight, news at eleven, bed at eleven-thirty, undisturbed sleep until seven-thirty the next morning.

His life was predicated on the

idea that since this routine had worked so well in the past, it went without saying that it would work in the same way for the rest of his life. Or perhaps the routine was important to him only because part of his life was without it on the many business trips he had to take away from home.

He was a freelance CPA, dealing with other people's fi-



nancial affairs, particularly during this period of early April, and had returned home the night before to the customary routine—a kiss and a hug for Carol, a savory dinner, TV afterwards, mild lovemaking later, bed at eleven-thirty. He was at home and at peace.

But there was a jarring break in his accustomed routine on this April Sunday morning. Carol was missing. Automatically, and from habit, he had wakened at the accustomed time and almost immediately noted something different, a lack in the atmosphere that he was accustomed to—no smell of coffee, no small rustlings in the kitchen, a vacancy somewhere that cried out to be filled.

He glanced at the next bed and at first could not take in what he saw. It had not been disturbed. The spread was still smooth, the single yellow cushion, satin with ruffles around the edge, perched undisturbed against the counterpane. There was no sound, no movement in the house. It felt empty.

He was up instantly, for the first time facing a change in routine that puzzled and alarmed him. "Carol!" he called. "Carol, where are you?" finally realizing how ridiculous his reaction was. If Carol were here, she would have slept in the next bed and would now be

making breakfast for the two of them.

She was gone. Not just this morning, *but last night, too!* He looked frantically through her closet, but nothing appeared to be missing. Her toilet articles were on her dressing table, her nightgown and robe hanging as usual on the back of the bathroom door. Carol's presence was here, but she was not.

He went into the living room, and it was just as he had left it last night, the paper on the floor by his armchair, the ashtray on the coffee table, holding the two stubs of cigarettes that Carol smoked every evening.

He moved into the kitchen. Nothing. Clean in a kind of haphazard way that was Carol's own. The dishes washed but still in the dishwasher, the dishcloth slung across the faucets above the sink, the cleaned frying pan and stewpan sitting on top of the stove, waiting for a complete drying out before being put away.

An overlooked fork lay on the floor near the refrigerator. The coffeepot waited to be plugged in.

He moved back into the living room, unable to gather all of his forces together, trying to adjust to whatever it was that had happened. Suddenly he noted something else—Carol's



handbag thrown carelessly on the davenport by the living room windows.

He opened it and it was just as it should be—wallet, identification cards, money, driver's license.

In his robe, still unaccepting the unaccountable situation, he went to the front porch and looked out, and nothing was different. The only thing different in Melvyn Wayne's universe was the fact that Carol was not here. Wherever she was, nothing had gone with her but the clothes on her back—navy blue slacks, he remembered, a white blouse, a nondescript sweater, things she had been wearing when they watched television the evening before.

She had disappeared.

He went to the telephone.

THE YOUNG MAN was tall, lean and wary; he had been with the county sheriff's office for the past eight years and had learned not to trust everything he saw, little of what he heard, nothing that seemed irrelevant. His name was Clifford Moffatt, and despite his wariness there was an occasional flash of humor in his eyes, a touch of compassion to the mouth that looked hard but wasn't.

In short, he had learned by experience to differentiate be-

tween the con men and women who were putting him on for their own benefit and the ones who were in serious trouble through no fault of their own. But sometimes he was tripped up by his own intuitiveness and then there was trouble for him at the station.

He had learned to be dubious about adults who suddenly disappeared. He knew that nine tenths of them disappeared voluntarily and that about half of these, for various reasons, wished it to appear foul play had been at work. Cliff Moffatt did not care for such types—they loused up the records at the station, and they loused up many of his preconceived ideas of how decent people should behave.

So, not without reason, he was more than a little skeptical at first regarding the disappearance of Carol Wayne.

He found her husband sitting in the living room, sipping coffee and staring into space. "Oh," Wayne said, "you're the police."

"Deputy Moffatt from the sheriff's office," said the young man. "May I come in?"

"Coffee?"

"Thanks." They sat sipping it while Cliff waited. Finally, "You said on the phone your wife has disappeared. You sure she didn't have some reason to

leave? Did you have a fight last night? No? Have you tried calling her friends or relatives to see if she's there?"

"No," said the man to this last. "We don't have any friends or relatives out here. We bought this house only a couple of months ago—we come from Indiana—and my wife was—is—kind of the shy type. She doesn't make friends easily."

"What does she do all day?"

"Do?" In surprise. "Well, what does any housewife do? Stayed home and did the housework and went shopping once in awhile and—"

"Did she like it?" the officer asked. He blew on his second cup of coffee. "This is good," he offered. "You make it?"

Melvyn Wayne looked annoyed as well as distraught. He was a thinnish man with thinnish hair and a thinnish smile which had not as yet broken through. "Carol fixed it last night," he said, hurrying to get the preliminaries over. "She always plugged it in the morning. Look, officer—"

"Call me Cliff," the younger man said. "Everyone does. We have a small office here, new community, try to make it on a friendly basis."

"Cliff, tell me about my wife!" Wayne said, almost between his teeth. "I want to know what happened to her. She couldn't

have gone anywhere voluntarily, she didn't take her purse, she just had on a light sweater, there was nothing—"

"Tell me again," said the young man. "What you said on the telephone. Or I'll tell you. The two of you followed your regular routine, looked at the eleven o'clock news, you yourself went to bed at eleven-thirty and she went out, you say, to look at the stars?"

"That's what she always said," the other man muttered. "To get a breath of fresh air. To look at the stars while they're still there, before they get filmed over with smog. Well, that's what she said. Then in about ten or fifteen minutes she'd come in to bed and by then I will have dozed off."

"Then how did you know when she came in?"

"Because she always did—that's all I know. Sometimes I wouldn't be asleep, sometimes I'd have to get up to go to the john, and there she'd be. But not last night. Nothing missing. She must have gone outside—she always did—and someone came along in a car and picked her up against her will."

"She never would have left with *nothing*, she was a good woman, she wouldn't just have taken off like that—my God, she wouldn't have left on foot, either, the closest bus stop's a

couple of miles from here! There's no street lighting, this is country, hasn't been developed yet—"

His voice was beginning to rise hysterically and, noting it, he stopped for a moment, sipped his coffee and continued in a lower key. "She did not," he added carefully, "she *could* not have left here on her own. Unless—"

"Unless," said the officer, "she was suffering from amnesia which, believe me, friend, happens a lot less often than frantic relatives are willing to believe. Their minds tell them their beloved ones simply could not have left home of their own accord, therefore, barring accidents, it had to be amnesia that made the poor creatures wander away.

"Sorry, sir, didn't meant to sound so abrupt. And of course she didn't take the car, since she left her purse here, with her keys and license in it."

"Two cars. She had a little VW she used to run around to the stores with. Both of them here, just where they were last night."

The young man rose, stretched his lanky frame, glanced again into the bedroom and bathroom, saw nothing that roused his curiosity or caused him to doubt the other man's words. Not at present.

*If he killed her, why didn't he ditch some of her clothes and claim she'd taken off on her own?*

He paused a moment at the door. "Oh, by the way, Mr. Wayne, can you let me have a picture of your wife?"

Wayne fumbled in his wallet and produced a small photo of the sweet and rather placid face of a youngish woman, ash blonde hair parted in the center and drawn back into a loose knot at her neck. Probably, Cliff reflected, the only type of hair arrangement that could suitably frame the sweetness of the face. Her lack of make-up did not detract from her quiet prettiness but rather enhanced it. Well, to each his own, he thought, and pocketed the picture.

"Take it easy, Mr. Wayne," he said. "I'm going to inquire around a bit."

Outside the new, attractive, approximately \$40,000 house that would have cost half that a few years ago, he stared up and down the street. It was dead-end, in the shape of a U and, so far in this new development, only four houses had been built, two at the end of the U, one on either side facing one another.

Back of the U, a steep wooded hillside rose, for this was once a lovely wild canyon and now the only wild things

that would inhabit it were people . . . forever.

He sighed, and walked around the house to the rear. Big hole in the ground, rectangle, deep at one end, shallow at the other, ready for cement. New swimming pool, the guy must be doing all right, CPA who did considerable travelling, no necessity for two incomes, otherwise wife would be working. No children.

What the hell did she *do* all day? A wife could have told him, but he was a bachelor and therefore ignorant in this respect. And why did she have to go out and look at the stars every night? Romantic? Artistic? Bored? Crazy? Hell, who knows. Crazier things have been done according to our robot standards of today. Who knows who's crazy?

NOW BEGAN WHAT he always referred to as the "slogging" part of his job—interviewing people who might, or might not, have an inkling of what had gone on to cause and execute some kind of crime. Talking, door to door, to people who were suspicious, stupid, ignorant, unreliable—but occasionally there was a spark from the dead fires, a bright and interesting and helpful individual, someone whose eyes told the truth and whose nature it was to be

aware of the importance of the rules of our society.

At these times, he felt rested and hopeful and grateful to the human race. But they did not occur often.

Melvyn Wayne's house was one of those at the end of the U, with another house to its right, also facing the length of the new street, with a third house facing the fourth across the way. Later, the street would be completed, filled with what other houses the small lots would provide for. Cliff was grateful that there were only three houses to do his slogging to.

The first, next to the Wayne house on the end of the U, belonged to a nice couple, both at home this Sunday morning, who, he learned, were a retired Unitarian minister and his wife. They chatted, because Cliff was curious for himself, not for his job, as to how a minister could afford this type of house and why the two of them had recently bought such a large one.

The man, a kindly gray-haired giant with creased face and blue innocent eyes that concealed his knowledge of the evil his profession had brought him into contact with, chuckled at Cliff's naive question.

"Oh, ministers aren't as poverty stricken as they used to be,



even though they aren't yet unionized," he said. "Twenty years ago we bought a nice house in Nebraska, where my work was, at twelve thousand dollars. Sold it six months ago for thirty-eight thousand dollars. The weather got too much for us out there, so here we are. . .

"Oh, you maybe wonder at the size of the house?" He chuckled again. "Too big for us, but not for our belongings and our two Brittany spaniels.

Couldn't part with either of them."

As if on cue, the two beautiful dogs at his feet lifted their heads and gave a slight bark acknowledging their rightful presence in their master's domain.

All this was pleasant but not productive.

"Mr. Emory," said Cliff, putting down his coffee cup, "what I'd like to know is whether you were aware of any activity on

this street last night. Traffic, a car perhaps, driving up here late, anything like that?"

"Why no, I can't say that I was," said the old man thoughtfully. "Marie!" he called to his wife in the kitchen. "You see or hear anything last night? Cars or something?"

She came into the room, wiping her hands. "Nope," she said. "Dull as ever." She twinkled, added slowly, "Well, just the car next door."

"Oh?" Cliff was instantly alert. "You mean over at the Wayne place?"

"Uh-uh." She jerked her head in the other direction. "Look, let's just put it this way—I'm a snoop. Never used to be but as I said, things get kind of dull around here, not that I mind much. Every time I get to picking a fight with Frank here because I'm bored, he up and carries me off on a trip and afterwards I'm so worn out I don't complain about being bored for the next six months."

"In the meantime I take an interest in the neighbors. Nothing much to interest me, though. There's a couple of teenagers next door, the Phillips place, and they're the only ones who do anything around here."

"Young Judy's boy friend brought her home a little after eleven last night while Frank

and I were having our usual game of chess, which I beat him at, as usual, and when we went to bed around midnight, the car was still there, with them inside it. Doing God knows what." She sighed. "Takes me back. Smooching sure is a lot of fun."

The two men laughed and Cliff said, "Anything else?"

"Well, nothing special. Nothing I'm going to shoot off my mouth about anyway," said the dumpy little lady, "Unless you tell me what's going on."

Cliff told them.

"Oh, my!" said Mrs. Emory. "Can't imagine whatever could have happened to her. We used to talk over the fence once in awhile. She never seemed to have much to do. Or to talk about. They're real quiet people. Mr. Wayne's away a lot of the time with his business, but I never hear any fights or see anything special."

"What about the house next door to the Waynes on the other side?"

"Funny family—"

"Now, Marie," her husband chided. "Gossip, gossip..."

"Well, that's what he wants, isn't it?" she said tartly. "That's a different kind of couple. He stays home all day. I hear he's an artist, and she goes out to work. She's the one with the money but he's the one with

the charm. Oh my!" She rolled her eyes and giggled. "Tall and brawny.

"I see him once in a while, pushing the lawn mower around, probably the only work he ever does. I hear the two of them yelling once in awhile when the weather's warm and the windows are open. I don't know any *real* dirt about them, though," she added regretfully. "We speak. We smile. We say hello and that's it."

Cliff loved the Emorys but eventually he finished his third cup of coffee, beginning to feel rather splashy inside, and took his way next door to the teenagers' pad. The girl opened the door dressed in little more than a couple of strings, her hair, like that of her peers, parted in the center and hanging straight down her back and over her face which, Cliff conceded, was at least better than having it up in rollers in accord with the the style of a few short years ago.

There was little that she could or would divulge after informing him that her parents had left for church. She was excited and interested, but had little to say except that her boy friend brought her home the night before after seeing a foreign film downtown and then they parked for awhile until her old man yelled at her to

come in before she got pregnant.

"Dirty old man," she said. "Always expecting the worst. Hasn't he ever heard of the Pill?" Cliff nodded gravely, deploing the depravity of aging parents.

"Did any cars come up this street while you were out there, or would you have had time to notice?"

"You're as dirty-minded as my old man!" she retorted, flouncing. "No—if that's what you want to know. How could we help noticing? The damn cars have to drive real slow up this street and then turn around at the end and go back down again so why *wouldn't* we notice? There wasn't a goddam bit of excitement in this street last night, like a strange car racketing along up and down. We'd a seen the headlights right in our faces. It was as exciting here last night as the middle of a cornfield out in Iowa."

Cliff could not resist. "Oh, was that where you did your last parking?"

The door slammed in his face and he departed, shaking his head. "That was unbecoming an officer and a gentleman," he admonished himself. "Stay dignified after this."

Across the street, at the Petroni's, his last port of call, a

tall muscular man opened the door, naked above the waist and wearing a pair of old dungarees below. He had bronze curly hair, a slight beard and guarded eyes. "Yeah?" he said.

"My name's Moffatt," said Cliff with the disarming smile he employed when trying to extract information from a possibly reluctant witness. "I'm investigating an occurrence next door. Thought perhaps you might help me."

The man at the door put out his hand. "I'm Nat Petroni," he said. "Northern Italy. Generations back. Have to explain my coloring to everyone who expects the typical Wop, black hair and sallow skin—"

Cliff's stomach turned a bit but he kept the smile on his face. "Just a few questions," he said as he followed the other man into the living room, which was individualistic to an extreme with water colors enhancing the walls to the exclusion of anything else, a vivid serape covering a low couch, an apparently hand-made throw rug in the center of everything and a coffee table with two unwashed wine glasses on it.

"Sit down, sit down," said his host. "My wife and I had a little party here last night—just for ourselves. Haven't pulled ourselves together yet. Now, what can I do for you? Get you

anything? Coffee? Bloody Mary? Champagne? What the hell am I talking about? We finished the champagne last night."

"Well, it seems that Mrs. Wayne, next door, stepped outside for a breath of air about eleven-thirty and hasn't been seen since. Any information you could give me would help a lot." His smile grew even more disarming. "Have to admit I'm somewhat stymied—all I can think of is a car came driving up, friend or foe, picked her up and took off. Now if you saw anything..."

"Last night, eh?" The big man scratched his head. "Nah. Would have noticed a car coming up on this side and then going down the other. We didn't pull our shades, should have, though."

His voice grew dreamy as he reminisced. "Wife and I were having a little celebration on our anniversary, candlelight and wine, the works, and then a bit of strip poker afterwards." He chuckled. "Got a little tiddly, should have drawn the drapes, never gave them a thought. Sure would have seen a car driving up, though. What do you figure could have happened to her?"

Following the prescribed routine of asking questions rather than answering them,



Cliff said, "Did you know the Waynes at all?"

"Well—just as neighbors. Chat over the hedge in back. Discuss gardening. Wayne told us to use his new swimming pool any time we wanted, as soon as it's finished. Ought to be ready by next week. The wife and I really go for swimming, haven't got the moola at present to put in one of our own, but why should we when we got one right next door? What are neighbors for?"

"Anyway, I'm home all day, doing my painting, going to have a one-man show before long. My wife, Angie, she has a job in a real estate office down town, is one of the brokers, in fact, so I'm the one who dishes out the neighborhood gossip over the back fence when things get too dull around here. Anything you want to know I can tell you."

Cliff evinced interest. "So what do you know? About them?"

"Not very much. Mrs. Wayne seemed—seems—kind of aimless. Doesn't like housework, has nothing else to do. Said she might find a job one of these days, matter of fact talking it over with my wife just a few days ago. I think Carol—Mrs. Wayne—we're all very informal around here—was sounding out my wife about maybe a job in

her company. Hey, Angie," he bellowed. "Come on out here a minute, will ya?"

A small pretty woman came part way into the room from the kitchen. She smiled and said, "Well, hurry it up, dear, I've got the waffles on." She had a mop of blonde curls and a face that might have been pretty except for the heavy make-up.

At this hour? Cliff was wondering. And how about that celebration last night if they yelled at each other periodically, according to the Emorys? Oh well, sometimes those ups and downs made for the happiest marriages. He supposed.

Cliff stood up. "I'm Cliff Mofatt, from the sheriff's office," he informed her. "And I'm inquiring about Mrs. Wayne next door. She seems to be missing. If there's anything you can tell me—"

"Hardly knew her," said the small woman. "I'm away all day at my job, you know, and too tired and busy when I get home to do much socializing. Nat here's the gossip in the family."

"You didn't notice a car driving up the street last night about eleven-thirty?"

She looked as if she would have liked to blush but found it impossible, so settled by looking uncomfortable. "No. We

were up late, playing cards, but I didn't see or hear anything."

"You didn't know Mrs. Wayne at all?"

"Oh sure. When all of us are in our back yards, gardening or having a drink, something like that. But I've found that getting too close to neighbors isn't always a good idea. You get chummy and see too much of each other; you get mad and don't see enough of each other. Being mad at your neighbors is the most uncomfortable way to live there is."

She gave them a flick of the dishtowel she'd been carrying over her arm, and disappeared back into the kitchen.

Petroni followed Cliff to the door. "Wish I could help you more, but I can't think of a single thing about Mrs. Wayne. Funny thing, just disappearing like that. I think maybe she was bored, staying home alone all this time, especially when Mel was away on his trips. Couldn't she just have walked away and said the hell with it all?"

"Not this time," said Cliff, and departed.

HE WAS BACK at the Wayne house the next morning, after a hard night's thinking. Slouched in the old leather armchair of his bathelot quarters, feet on the beat-up footstool, a can of

Coors at his elbow, he sat and thought. Then he got up and thought.

He remembered a pearl of wisdom offered free by a novelist friend who said, "It isn't the writing that's hard, it's the thinking that goes into it before it comes out. Plain hell." So Cliff knew that it wasn't the action of his job that brought results, but the concentrated thought processes that preceded it.

He thought—and then he slept on his thoughts. When he arrived at the Wayne house on Monday morning, thoughts were sorted out and in order: Wayne *had* to know more than he was saying. "Let us," he cautioned himself, "proceed on that premise."

A lively morning, he thought. Mr. Emory out in front-weeding his petunia patch, the teenagers' mother washing the family car in the driveway, the Petronis loading up their station wagon practically to the roof, Wayne sitting on his front steps, exactly as Cliff had left him the day before.

*Has he been there all night?* Cliff asked himself incredulously. *Wonder if he's gone off the beam.*

He wandered over to the Petroni's, said, "Good morning," and, "Going somewhere? Looks like a fishing trip's in order."

"Right you are," said the burly youngish man, looking free of care. "Wife's got a vacation, so we're heading toward Manzanita Lake for a few days. May wander on from there. Any news of Carol?"

Cliff shook his head and was tempted to say, "Any minute now—we have our spies on her spoor," in the time-honored way of the police who didn't know which way to look, but managed to refrain. "Well, good fishin'," he said. "Maybe we'll have news by the time you get back."

Mrs. Petroni smiled at him, her black curls awry, her face heavy with make-up, dark glasses shading her eyes, a sweater pulled tight around her against the brisk morning air. They took off and Cliff wandered over to Wayne.

He said gently, "Mr. Wayne, we're doing everything we can, but in the meantime you should be taking care of yourself. Have you had any breakfast? Did you get some sleep last night?"

The shrunken man on the steps tried to smile. "Slept a little," he said. "Had some coffee. Can't stand the house. It—it seems so empty."

"I'll bet," Cliff said to himself and wandered around the house to the back and leaned against a pillar of the covered patio to stare at the swimming pool,

which, while he watched, was suddenly noisy with machinery racket and the men who were causing it. Cement mixer. "Figures," Cliff said to himself.

They were ready to pour. He looked and looked and remembered his thinking of the night before and told himself there was no way that Carol could have disappeared of her own volition, leaving behind every necessity of life in the modern world, including identification and money—he had already made inquiries concerning amnesia victims; just to be on the safe side—and he stared and stared at the swimming pool that would soon be covered forever with a thick coating of cement.

He thought, *What if—What if—*

He wandered over to it and looked down the wooden molds of the sides and onto the flat smooth surface of the bottom of the pool and saw that there was a place that wasn't as flat and smooth as it should have been. Almost smooth, but not quite—a faint roughage here and there.

The men began to pour and Cliff yelled, "Lay off!"

"Yeah?" one of the men, a muscular black man, yelled back at him. "What for?"

"Because I say so. Start digging."

The man stared at him. "You crazy? We got to get this job done. Couldn't pour on Friday—too much moisture in the air. Gotta do it today."

"I'm the law!" Cliff roared. "And I say start digging—right there in the middle. See that rough spot? Start digging there."

The man snorted. "We ain't about to dig," he said. "The union wouldn't like it."

"Well, maybe the union wouldn't like it if I started prying into your licenses down at City Hall. Ain't ever dug into any licenses yet without finding some kind of hanky-panky."

They began digging. Cliff went back to his post, leaning against the patio wall. He waited until he heard a yell from the depths of the pool.

"Hey, chief, there's something here!"

Cliff went over to the edge and looked down and saw that the men had unearthed a thing wrapped in a sheet—incongruously, a sheet printed with little yellow and white daisies, with green leaves, a ghoulish shroud—and his face hardened with rage.

He said, "Hold it!" to the men and went around to the front of the house and said, with no finesse, "I believe we have found your wife, Mr. Wayne. Come with me."

Wayne, looked totally bewildered, sat still, uncomprehending.

"Now!" Cliff ordered and led the ashy-faced husband to the back of the house and to the edge of the pool and told the men down below to remove the sheet from the form they had dug up.

It was a corpse all right—a new corpse—a corpse with blonde curly hair and a lot of make-up.

"That isn't my wife!" Wayne whispered needlessly. "That's Angie, next door!"

Cliff stared at him. "But I just saw her leave with her husband."

*My God, he thought in anguish, I had them, I had them right in my hands!*

He raced to his car radio to order an AFB on a white Ford station wagon registered to Mr. and/or Mrs. Petroni, probably headed east, but check all points. Half of his hard night's thinking had been right—there *had* been a corpse. But the other half had been wrong—it was obviously not that of the missing woman.

LATER THAT DAY, he returned to the Wayne house for the last time.

Melvyn Wayne was still—or again—sitting on the front steps. Lost. Cliff wondered if

he'd stirred since the last time he'd seen him.

He said quietly, "We found them," and the other man looked up at him, only half-comprehending.

"They didn't get much of a start on us," Cliff said, sitting down on the steps beside the other man. "Got them on the highway near Modesto. Heading south, not for Manzanita Lake."

"Who?" said Melvyn Wayne, staring at him blankly, as if he had been living in another world and was unwilling to be brought back from it.

"Petroni," Cliff said gently, "and your wife. It was a fine plan, if it worked, and it almost did. One barrel of cement in the swimming pool and that would have been it."

He pulled out a beat-up pack of Lucky Strikes and offered one to the other man, who shook his head, then lit one for himself. He hated this part of his job. He was always the bad news giver, he was thinking morosely—the boss always gets off free.

"I hate to tell you this, Mr. Wayne, but your wife and the guy next door were having a hot and heavy love affair. Easy for them, with you away so much and Petroni's wife at her job. The wife came home unexpectedly Thursday afternoon

with a migraine headache and caught the two of them in her own bed.

"To a woman," he added, his voice quiet, "this is the ultimate insult, worse even than the adultery itself. So she raised hell, screamed at them, said she was going to lay it on the line with you, threatened to kick her husband out, which was bad news to him because she was his sole support."

"She flew at Carol with her fingernails and Petroni gave her a swat. It was a hard one and knocked her across the living room table and onto the hearth, breaking her neck in the process."

There was a faint sound from the man sitting beside him on the steps, and Cliff paused for a moment. "Sorry," he said. "Thought you ought to know the truth."

"Yes," said Melvyn Wayne. "I want to know the truth. I don't believe it, but I want to hear it."

"Believe it," said Cliff. "Because you're going to have to. Anyway, there was panic in the house next door. There was just no way to get out of a charge of murder—even manslaughter would have finished them off. So they went downtown, to their separate banks, and Carol cleaned out yours, Mr. Wayne, since both savings and checking

were in a joint account. Petroni got what he could.

"But they didn't take off then—too obvious, while you were away—and besides, they had to dispose of the body. Wrapped it in a sheet from his house—there are matching pillow slips there, we had our men go through it this afternoon. Then, that night, Thursday, they buried her in the swimming pool."

He paused. There was silence from the shrunken, unhappy man beside him. Cliff stepped on the butt of his cigarette, put it carefully in his pocket, continued, "You came home Friday evening and found everything the same as usual. Saturday night you went to bed at eleven-thirty, after the news, and Carol went outside for her breath of air—as usual."

"Except that she didn't return. She simply stepped next door, into Petroni's house, as planned. And put on one of Mrs. Petroni's blonde wigs that she was in the habit of using when she didn't have time for the beauty shop, and a lot of heavy make-up."

"Petroni lied about the candlelit romantic dinner they had together that night because

your wife was having dinner with you and his wife was already dead, but not about the strip poker game they had later. This was a ploy to prove to any passerby that his wife was safe and well at home. Except that no one saw them.

"That was the beauty of the whole scheme, Mr. Wayne. Petroni and Carol knew that whatever search was on would be for her, not Mrs. Petroni, and the two of them would be moving to another town a long way from here."

"Who would look for them? Who would look for the Petronis when it was Carol Wayne who was missing? She would never be found and neither would they. Frankly, I wouldn't give much for the kind of life they'd have had together if this thing had worked out, but..."

The older man stood up at last and for a moment as silent. Dignity and grief mantled him. Finally he said, "Carol didn't need to do all that. I would have given her anything she wanted—divorce, money, freedom, everything. I loved her. I—trusted her."

He turned and walked, without another word, into the empty house. Alone.

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